Chapter 5

Cultural Expressions of Karbi Ethnicity: Narratives and Iconography of the Homeland

Ethnonationalism can be looked as a kind of cultural revivalism. Every ethnic assertion movement stimulates its culture; re-defines and standardizes cultural expressions and also creates new ones. Memories are explored to commemorate the present. In the context of Karbi identity movement, the traditions of orality, materiality and performances – all are appropriated in the present to define and re-define the desired distinctiveness of the community. In doing this, it creates the binaries of self and other, genuine and spurious, sacred and profane, indigenous and foreign and so on, through cultural codes and narratives. How the different cultural genres are exploited to redefine the community which in turn helps in strengthening the Karbi ethnicity is discussed in this chapter.

In the very first visit to Diphu, the headquarter of the district of Karbi Anglong in Assam, and also the hub of Karbi political activism, this researcher was confronted in the doorway of the Diphu town with an artistic creation – a sculptural image. This sculptural portrayal is the heroic fight of Rongpherpi Rongbe- the brave Karbi lady, a semi-mythical figure, frequently referred by Karbis about her courage and bravery – how she protested and fought against the Kachari Kingdom against its prejudice and exploitation. This powerfully historicized narrative - the fight of Rongpherpi Rongbe though denotes the bravery of Karbi women in surface level, but it connotes that every Karbi folk should ready at any and every time to fight against any injustice to its nation.

Another such sculpture is installed at the other entrance to the town, through which people enter by train, is also marked by another sculpture. This second sculpture is a symbol, or perhaps more than that, – a sacred symbolic artifact, which in traditional Karbi society calls as Bong, which literally means the
‘bottle gourd’. It is made from gourd shells. Bong is having significant importance- a part and parcel in traditional Karbi society. No ritual or worship to the traditional deities can be performed without bong. Even in Karbi adam asar\(^1\), the bong is an indispensable pre-requisite. A mythical narrative is available that explains such deep semiotic significance of the gourd shell in the ethnic life world of the Karbis. According to this myth, the seeds of the gourd (bong) were gifted by a traditional Karbi God named as Songnar Recho, to the folks of the village Muring-Morong. The village Headman cultivated it in his land and within a short spun of time the plants produced three types of gourds namely- Bongkrok, Bongchum, and Langkok. After it ripped, the seeds were removed and then smoked. The traditional Karbi society believes that since then, these three types of Bong are used in different holy occasions of the Karbis. The first one is used in Adam-Asar, the second in worship and the final one to retrieve the traditional rice beer from pot. This is, thus, a metaphor of sacredness in the traditional Karbi society, as no sacred occasion such as marriage or any other ritual can be performed in absence of the bong. Of course, use of the bong in different rituals and performances carries another set of narratives and myths, but, pasting a sacred cultural item in public places also carries connotative meanings. This probably, to let the visitors know the rich heritage of the community in one sense, or more in a political understanding expression of ethnic identity and ethnicity.

Another material artifact that powerfully resonates with Karbi identity, and which has become a very common iconic metaphor for Karbi ethnicity, is the *jambili athon* – a totem of the Karbis. This is a wooden craft, black in colour having a central axis and four lateral branches. In the top of the central axis a bird whose local name is *vojaru* is fixed. On the other lateral branches also other birds are fixed. In the top of the central axis another two small birds are attached. The *jambili athon* is displayed publicly in different occasions like *chomankan\(^2\)* and other socio-religious ceremonies of the Karbis. This

\(^1\) It is traditional marriage system of the Karbis.
\(^2\) It is a death ritual performed publicly by the Karbis.
particular, socio-religious artefact or more emphatically the totem of the society widely used in different other modern day to day activities. It is widely used in leaf late, welcome gates of any meeting or event, or sometime as a token of gift to others. Keeping a miniature form of the jambili athon in each Karbi household is quite common. In two parks of the Diphu town, namely the Recreation Park which is adjacent to the Diphu town and the Samson Sing Engti Park in the middle of Diphu town one can see the jambili athon installed. The installation and display of such symbols in public spaces is a part of the official package of the state sponsored schemes, which in signifies ethnicity as articulated from the above in an institutionalized manner.

A more ordinary article which is carried by the Karbis, irrespective of class, age and sex, is the Karbi traditional bag. From school-going kids to the office clerks, from the college / university students to activists – everyone carries bag which has become a popular marker of Karbi-ness for outsiders and the Karbis themselves. Small-scale industries, self-help groups produce and sell such bags. This quintessential textile product contains the jambili athon is knitted on it, with the decorated phrase “KARBI ANGLONG” along with it. There are also pieces clothing in the forms of jackets for boys and girls where similar motifs are incorporated. Such material practices are a testimony to the Karbi ethnic consciousness at the popular level – which is not only politically satisfying but commercially profitable too. Such ethnicized aesthetics, displayed both in public as well as private spheres, can be understood as a part of the larger institutionalized text of the renewed Karbi ethnicity in current times.

In the following pages, some of such sites of cultural articulations are described where the various kinds of collective imaginations and negotiations of the Karbis pertaining to their ethnic consciousness are reflected.
5.1 Oral Narratives: Homeland and its heroes

Various items of oral narratives, like myths, legends, tales, etc., play a significant role in bringing people of different strata to a similar platform, which ensures their collective continuity over many generations (Smith, 1986). In Karbi nationality formation, different oral accounts of creation and migration, narratives on mythical and legendary figures play a vital role in consolidating the Karbi ethnic identity. In the interviews taken during the fieldwork of this research, men and women of different age groups invariably referred to the stories of Rongpherbi Rongbe, Rukasen, Thong Nokbe, Semsonsing Ingti which they use as indispensable instruments for narrating their Karbi-ness.

The Karbis associate themselves to a singular hemprek (homeland) of their past through the institution of kingship. Karbis are believed to be divided into three territorial units in the hills. Those are Chingthong, Nilip Ronghang and Amri Morlang. As validated by various oral accounts and ritualistic practices, these three territorial jurisdictions were connected to the royal Karbi court and the Karbi king who was called Lindokpo. In village level, the Sarthe (village headman) practices his power e.g. distribution of land, solving of different disputes in the village, through the ‘Me’ (village council). The Sarthe is taken over from Haway to see the affairs of numbers of villages. In the hierarchical order haway is superseded by Pinpo who had the access to the Royal court and the lindokpo of the Karbis resided in the capital Ronghang Rongbong³. After the formation of Autonomous Council, the Sarthe and Haway is incorporated in the administrative set up (Borbara, 2008). A lump-sum amount of money is arranged by the Autonomous Council as pension to the current Lindokpo.

The existence of Karbi kingship system and the high regard of the Lindokpo in Karbi society give the scope to memorize the glorious past and a Hemprek. In

---

³ Ronghang Rongbong is the capital of traditional Karbi king. It is nowadays modernized keeping the traditional flavour through the MP fund by Dr. Jayanta Rongpi.
the process of ethnic mobilization such executed memoires effectively validate the idea of Karbi homeland.

During my fieldwork in Karbi Anglong, different varieties of oral narratives were found which relate to the issues like origin and migration of the Karbis, heroic legends, religious beliefs and ritualistic practices. Regarding the origin of the Karbis, most respondents referred to a creation myth which describes the Karbis as people born out of a mythical egg. This etymological narrative is also performed through a song called the Mosera\(^4\) song. The song elaborates how the Karbis were born, after series of difficulties, from the egg laid by a mythical bird named volplakkpi. This bird has not been identified with any of the species found in the real world. An interesting aspect of this origin myth is that it describes the Ahoms, the Khasis and the Nagas as the peoples who were also born out of the same egg – articulating a shared point of origin among these different communities.

In my interviews, some respondents talked about their religious practices which are distinct from similar activities practiced by surrounding communities. Some of the respondents identified themselves as Hindus or Christian whereas other sections preferred to call themselves as Hemphu Mukhrang. There are differences of opinion about their affiliations with institutionalized religions, particularly with the Hinduism, which often crop up in public debates. A common hegemonic perspective is to treat them as backward Hindus, which is reflected in some of the governmental census operations since colonial times. However, a relatively recent emic perspective taken by some of the Karbis is that they were actually the followers of their own distinct type of animism which had nothing to do with Hinduism or any other such big institutionalized religions. Because of such dichotomies, the Karbis themselves are seen to be involved in their own census and documentations. What is largely agreed upon now is that the Karbis were

\(^4\) Mosera is a lengthy narrative describes the origin and migration ordeal of the Karbis.
initially the followers of their own animistic faith, but in later times some of them took affiliations under Hinduism and Christianity. There are still followers of the traditional faith who worship the Karbi deity Hemphru-Mukrang as the supreme power, in addition to other different deities on different ritual occasions. Dharam Singh Teron argues that “Karbi belief system is basically composed of the ancestor worshipping, ‘worship of household deities, ‘territorial deities’ and the death ritual or ‘karhi. Particularly it is the Hemphu-Mukrang duo that dominates the Karbi pantheon” (Teron 2011, 82-83). Mr. Teron, who is a political leader of the ASDC fraction and a cultural activist, has further argued that it was the census legacy which converted the animist Karbis to Hindu. He also asserts that there is no equivalent term for the religion in Karbi language though a Sanskrit derivative ‘dhorom’ is used in the modern vocabulary. At one point, some Karbis were in favour of a clear demarcation between the followers of the traditional Karbi faith and the ones who resorted to Hinduism or Christianity by labelling the followers of the traditional faith as Honghari. The assumption is that the term Honghari was used by Baptist Missionaries to make a clear cult distinction between Christian Karbis and the traditional Karbis, where Christian Karbis were known as Sikur. However, avoiding all such old terminologies, many traditional Karbis nowadays prefer to identify themselves as the follower of Hemphu-Mukrang.

The legend of Rongpherpi Rongbe is another narrative which was frequently referred by many respondents in my fieldwork. As this legend goes, the original name of Rongpharpi Rongbe was Kareng Rongpharpi, and she was the wife of On Teron and the mother of Thong Teron (popularly known as Thong Nokbe). Thong Teron is one of the legendary heroes of the Karbis. They lived in a village called Rong-teplong under the rules of Kachari (Dimasa) Kingdom. During the period, the Dimasa king reared tigers as his domesticated pets. In order to feed the tiger cubs, the king used to send his soldiers to collect Human milk which was fed to the hungry cubs of the king. One day, Kareng Rongpharpi went for collecting firewood’s along with her
friends; and after returning to her house, she kept the firewood and her axe in front of the courtyard. As her child was hungry and was crying, she hurriedly took her baby from a *ja-e* (a swinging seat for baby’s sleep) to feed her milk. At that moment the soldiers of Dimasa King arrived at the house of Kareng Rongpharpi to collect the milk. By seeing the soldiers, Kareng Rongpharpi requested them to stay away for some time as she was feeding milk to her child. But the soldiers didn’t care to oblige her and hold the hand of Kareng Rongpharpi to draw her milk by forcible means. Angered by the acts of the soldiers, she suddenly took hold of an axe which was near to her and hacked them to death. After hacking them to death, she realized that the Dimasa would surely retaliate for the loss of their soldiers. So she requested and recommended her people to flee instead of fighting, as she knew that they would never be able to withstand the enemy strength. So, to escape from the enemy attack, she and her fellow people flee from their land and went across the Kopili river. Some believe, they crossed the Kopili River with the help of a big python which was sent by god for their help. In another version of belief, Kareng Rongpharpi stroke the river with a *harpi* (weaving implements) and the river stopped flowing for some time, giving a passage to Kareng Rongpharpi and her people. After crossing the Kopili river, she and her people established their village at Koka near Amreng. Current believe of the Karbis is that this was the first settlement of the Karbis under the leadership of Kareng Rongpharpi that led to the establishment of the Karbi Kingdom at Rongkhang Area. Thus, from this flee, she is known as Rongpharpi Rongbe (*Rongbe* means ‘Flee’ in Karbi) by the Karbi people. The story of protest of the brave Rongpherpi against the Kachari kingdom became a binding narrative in the Karbi nationality discourse.

Rongpherpi’s son Thong Nokbe Teron, as mentioned earlier, became another legendary hero of the Karbis. Thong Nokbe belonged to the Teron clan. Nokbe means a warrior or hero in Karbi. The legend says that, he was the bodyguard of Jayanta Narang – the king of the nearby Jaintia kingdom. Thong Nokbe was
popular after he did *Khatvi atovar kepan* (cleaning jungles between two villages) for which the Karbis could flee from the Jaintia Kingdom. Thong Teron killed the King of Ghilani (Borthol) Recho-Ikpo whom the Jaintia King could not defeat. The popular imagination about Thong Nokbe is that he was a man of bigger physique than a normal man. He was killed by the soldiers of the Jaintia king as they could not accept the fact that the Jaintia king honoured him more than the Jaintia soldiers. In the conspiracy of the soldiers, Thong Nokbe was told to pluck mangoes from a mango tree; and during this plucking, the soldiers killed him with arrows and brought the head of Thong before the king saying that the head is of Recho-Ikpo’s. But the king could figure it out and punished the soldiers.

The legendary narratives about the heroics of Thnog Nokbe, his tragic death and the honours he received from the King of a nearby kingdom – all these have made him a national hero for the Karbis. It gives them pride in memorizing and recounting the heroism of their leader. A statue of the legendary figure is placed in Donkamukam of Karbi Anglong district.

The story of *Rukasen* is also an important folk narrative in the Karbi folklore discourses. As per the narrative circulated among them, Rukasen was the first person to establish a village among the Karbis. The story holds that the real name of Rukasen was Kasen Teron. In Karbi “Ru” means grandfather, so, the Karbi people used to call him as “Rukasen” meaning grandfather Kasen, and later he was popularly known as Rukasen (Bey 2004, 15). He established the first village containing thousands of houses in the Nongkular plateau and the name of the village was Muring Rongsopi. As an organizational unit of the community, the village has a significant importance in Karbi society. The traditional Karbi society runs through *Me*, hence, villages play a vital role in decision making. This practice is prevalent among the Karbis. So, the story of Rukasen is also an important component in Karbi political discourse.

Rukasen organized three *Jirsong* (Youth Dormitory) in his villages, one at the middle of the villages and other two at the two ends of the village. The youth
were imparted the cultural activities and social activities so that they become capable members of the community. Rukasen is known for his efforts to create a mutually acceptable social setup at the village-level of the Karbi community. During his time, which is claimed to be as long as nine hundred years from 1300 B.C to 400 B.C., the people had adopted Kasen’s ideology and created for themselves the similar status of Kasen (Terang 2003, 5). Many years later, when Karbis had migrated to Salween river valley in China, there appeared some influential persons who had been adopting the ideology of Kasen for reforming their own societies. They were Ridem Timung, Wejeng Inghi, Thanglong Ingti and others. Among them Ridem Timung was the best ruler. During that time, most of the tribes of Tibetan region did not take rice as food. Perhaps such food had not been introduced or paddy cultivation was yet to be developed in the region. The people had generally used arum, yam, potato, chosot (a kind of arum) and bajara as the major food (ibid).

After departing from China, Ridem and Moidong (Grandson of Rukasen), had established villages in the eastern part of the Pengja Hills in Burma territory, each of the Village had comprising more than thousand houses as per the Ideology of Kasen and they lived happily after the treaty of Khmer War. There was a myth that Rongsopo or Teron Rongsopo, the son of Moidong Teron, saw a dream of beautiful and charming goddesses who were playing in a river bank of Marle-Abi of river Kuleng. And the myth is believed to be the origin of the paddy in the Karbi societies.

It is noteworthy in most of the above narratives that they are centered upon heroic individuals who had committed extraordinary actions towards the pride and continuity of the Karbi community. Creation of national heroes/heroines or converting mythical, legendary or historical figures to a national icon is a recurring activity in any nationalist movement or ethnic assertion. The narratives of sacrifice, bravery and intelligence of the distinguished leaders of a community contribute greatly in invoking and consolidating a shared sense of belonging among the members of the community. While examining the folk heroes in the Tamil heroic ballads, Blackburn asserted that “the folk hero is
one who protects what the folk group values and/or challenges what the group devalues” (Blackburn 1978, 131). The hero narratives of the Karbis aptly reflect this fact, as the characters of Kareng Rongpherpi, Thong Nokbe Teron and Rukasen embody the current ethnonational sentiments of the Karbis. It is also interesting to note that in the narratives of Kareng Rongpherpi and Thong Nokbe Teron, their heroics are substantially by virtue of their victimhood due to inter-community confrontations. This theme of victim as heroes can be read as a core theme in the larger text of the Karbi ethnicity where the community itself is portrayed as a victim of a dominant hegemonic nationalism.

5.2 Narratives of Contestation:

Ethnic assertion is often seen to involve some kind of contestation, negation or negotiation with an existing dominant-hegemonic discourse. Right from the cases of Indian nationalism to sub-nationalisms or the little nationalisms, a counter-discourse is evident at all the respective levels which contests against the hegemonic impositions.

In almost all the ethnic mobilizations in Assam, the Assamese language-based nationalism has been identified as the immediate dominant hegemonic discourse. The various ethnic groups have actually produced their respective ethnic identities by articulating differences with, and distances from, the so-called non-tribal, elitist and Assamese-language-centric nationalism. Sometimes this is accomplished by taking direct allegiance to the discourse of the so-called sanskritic mainland India or beyond. For example, in the context of language, the Bodos and the Karbis negated the Assamese script and adopted Devnagari and Roman scripts respectively. The Karbi ethnicity formation demonstrates a series of counter-hegemonic discourses, largely to negate the dominance of the Assamese nationalism.

In earlier times, the Karbis were popularly known as Mikirs. However, different literatures show that the term Mikir was an exonym given by the
non-Karbis, whereas the Karbis themselves liked to be called as the Karbis. There are different stories about the origin of the term Mikir. These stories were popularly accepted by the community and by others also. In the peak of Karbi nationalism, an alternative discourse was created by the Karbi elites regarding the origin of the term Mikir. The popular discourse circulated in the society is that when the Karbis entered Assam they had a domestic cat with them. Unfortunately the cat was lost. When they were searching for the cat they confronted with another group who demanded their identity. The question was unintelligible for the Karbis; and they misunderstood it as a question on what they were searching for. Therefore, they answered with the word mengkiri (cat). The other group thought mengkiri was the name of their group (i.e. the Karbis). This mengkiri later became Mikir. In an alternative narrative, it is said that a Karbi King named Thireng Wareng set up his capital at Dimapur who had a daughter name Mekri. She was married to a Naga prince. The Nagas could not pronounce Mekri and pronounced as Mikir.

However, Teron and Phangcho, two of the native Karbi intellectuals of current times, provide a different interpretation of the term Mikir in which they have traced the root of the term in the organizational setup of Karbi villages. Their version goes as follows:

Our search for the meaning of Mikir or the nearest to it has led us to reconsider the Karbi village traditions. A traditional Karbi village- Rong is organized around the institution of a village headman who is known as a ‘sarthe’ (among the hill Karbis) and bangthe or rongthe (among the plains dwelling Karbis). Members of every household of the village are called ‘mekar’. The senior most of all the Mekars is known as ‘mekar asar’ (hill Karbis) who holds a position in the village court presided over by the Sarthe/bangthe. …. It could therefore be possible that a Karbi introduced himself to an outsider only as a ‘mekar’ or an ordinary member of a Karbi village. In a sense, every Karbi is a ‘mekar’ and in those days of communication barrier erected by unintelligible linguistic differences, the outsider simply took the tribe to be only as ‘mekar’, which in course of time got corrupted.
to give the word ‘mikir’” (Teron & Phangcho 2008, 68-69).

Thus the genesis of the term Mikir is a debated issue. Charles Lyall in the monograph entitled “The Mikir” also mentions that the Mikirs calls themselves as Arleng or Men. The name Mikir was given by the Assamese. However, the explanation given by Teron and Phangcho removes the Assamese authorship in describing and labelling the Karibis as Mikirs.

Bishnu Prasad Rabha, one of the doyens of Assamese culture, considers the Mikirs as the discoverer of Assam – for which he describes them in one of his Assamese articles as the Columbus of Assam. Rabha wrote:

…the Mikirs were the aborigines in Assam. They were the first one to explore the hills, caves, rivers, plains and the forests of Assam. They are the Columbus, the discoverer of Assam……(Bora & Das 2008, 934. Translated by researcher.)

In his typical reconstruction of the human evolution and migration in Assam, Rabha poured all his praise for the ‘brave’ Karbis; and categorically ascertained that the “Assamese nation is ever-grateful to the Mikirs” (ibid) for starting the human settlement in Assam. However, as mentioned earlier, Rabha’s treatment of the Karbis as the Columbus of Assam has been subject to a different kind of political reading by a section of the Karbis in current times.

….the advent of Columbus in the Americas resulted only in the cruel colonisation and devastation of the indigenous population and their histories, the analogy that indigenous people had everywhere the same fate at the hands of the rulers is a point we must all agree upon. For like Columbus, we Karbis did not ‘colonize’ but instead, they have been colonized, divided, dispossessed” (Teron 2011,3).

In this reading, Columbus is the representative of the European colonizers, who became responsible for severe ethnic cleansing in America. Moreover, Rabha’s text is believed to be negated also because of the fact that Rabha
himself is a prominent icon of Assamese nationalism. That this negation of the Columbus legacy is a serious issue in the counter-hegemonic discourse of the Karbis is evident in the official reference to it mentioned in the website of the Karbi Youth Festival – which is described later in this chapter.

The confrontation with the Assamese hegemony is also visible in their abandoning of using the Assamese language and literary/artistic products. The elderly bilingual Karbis, who took their early education in Assamese medium, could read and write the Assamese language. But this is no longer the case now. What was found from the responses received in my interviews in several areas of the Karbi Anglong is that the number of adults who read and write Assamese is very minimal, though speaking Assamese as a lingua franca is still there. Consumption of Assamese books and newspapers, movies and music is practically abandoned now. In such matters, the choice has shifted towards Hindi and English.

5.3 Material Culture

The material culture is a significant part of any culture. In ethnic assertion movements, material culture plays a pivotal role in articulating and appropriating ethnicity and nationalism as it signifies the distinctiveness of the group. In the case of Karbi ethnicity, different material cultural forms are seen to be used extensively in public and private domains. As mentioned earlier, Bong, Jambili Athon etc. are some of such cultural items which have become powerful symbols of the recent Karbi identity.

A replica of the Bong (gourd-shell) is visible at the entrance of the Diphu town, giving a symbolic meaning of entrance into the Karbi world. Bong is used in different ways and in different holy occasions. The word Bong means ‘younger brother’ in Karbi language and the reason behind calling the gourd shell as Bong bears another myth, which is often narrated in folk songs called ‘Bong Keman’ or ‘Bong-keplang alun’. According to the myth, once there was
a Karbi village named *Muring Rongsopi* located on the bank of the *Kuleng River*. *Rang Mukrang* was the chief of the village and had five children. *Kareng* and *Kading*, the two daughters of *Rang Mukrang* invented *Thap* (medicinal cake used in the preparation of rice beer), by following a dream which they had seen. Some days after the invention of *thap* and *rice beer*, *Rang Mukrang* had gone to the river to take bath. While washing his face, his teeth fell down in the river water and it remained floating. By seeing this, he picked up his teeth from the river water and brought home. Then he placed it in his garden compound. Just after a few days, a green creeper came out from his teeth, and in course of time two flowers bloom from it, and the two flowers produced bottle shaped round fruits. After the maturation of the fruits, he plucked the fruits and the inner portions were taken out. Then he cleaned the fruits and left them to the hanging platform called *Rap* near the fire place to get them dried up. He made two vessels out of them. When asked by his daughters about the name of those vessels, *Rang Mukrang* replied that it should be called as *Bong* or brother since the vessel had originated from his tooth and he considered the vessel as his son. Thus from that day, the vessel or gourd shell is known as *Bong* in Karbi society. Those first two vessels were named as *Bongchim* and *Bongdam* or damdam.

The making of *Bong* is simple, requires only the fruits of the bottle-gourd creeper; but it takes a considerably long span of time, around five to six months, to complete the whole process of *Bong* making. The process of *Bong* making starts with the plucking of matured gourds; and then the gourds are made little hollow at the tips of their necks. After that, salts and water are put for decaying of the inners flesh of the gourds. This is followed by the removal of the decayed flesh and seeds with the help of water and bamboo strips. Now it becomes hollow as the whole inner portion of the gourd is removed and only the hard rind remains. Though, the gourd has been hollowed, it is not ready for used. In order to make it usable, it is kept on the *Rap* (Bamboo-made hanging structure over the fireplace), to make it properly dried-up and hardened so that it becomes durable. Generally the heat of the fire dries them up and makes
them harder whereas the smoke gives them a dusty black colour, but it is the dusty dark colour which gives the Bong a glitter look. After completing all those process, the Bong is now ready to use.

The Karbis mainly used Bong to keep the traditional rice beer, which is also an inseparable part of Karbi traditional culture. The offering of rice beer is compulsory in almost all the rituals of the Karbis, including the various rites of passage like birth, marriage, and death and other important occasions. Apart from such occasions, rice beer is also used in welcoming the guest; and is offered to give an honour to respected elderly persons like, maternal uncle, priest, or other dignitaries. Rice beer has an important role in the celebration of any festival whether it is religious or secular; and all the offerings of rice beer are to be made invariably with the help of a Bong. In rural Karbi society, gourd-shell is frequently used, along with other bamboo implements, for storage of liquids like rice beer and water. Though modern utensils are used in the kitchens of urbanized families, the symbolic use of the Bong or at least its name is still in practice. In many of such urban households, bong is found as a decorative piece or as an object of paintings and pictures hanged in the drawing room. In different leaflets, brochures and calendars the picture of bong is quite common.

_Jambili Athon_ is another socially and culturally important symbol of the Karbis. It is widely used as a decorative item at every Karbi household, sometimes knitted as a motif in the traditional bags and jackets, or as miniature forms to be given to guests as a token of love and affection (Teron 2008, 104).

_Jambili Athon (Jambili means bag in Karbi and athon means branch, stand or a place to keep things) is a traditional woodcraft of the Karbis, and is entirely made from the wood of a particular tree called Bengvoi tree. The typical structure of this item is about 4 metre in height; and consists of a central axis which is called Athonpi and a whorl of four small branches called aro-athon. At the top of the central axis is placed a local bird known as Vojaru (racket-
tailed Drongo); and the four branches below are fixed with another local bird known as Vorale. A third variety of bird, called Voleng (woodpecker), is placed on the main axis below each of the lateral four branches. Seeds of Chuselok are fixed to the head of the birds to resemble eyes. The Karbis regard the Vojaru as the king of the birds, who is always followed by other ordinary birds (atoi-ani – the ordinary birds). In Jambili Athon, the Vojaru is portrayed as the Karbi King, who always protect his people (symbolized by other smaller birds viz., Vorale and Voleng) and enjoys peaceful co-existence amongst themselves in their independent places reflected by five branches. The Voleng even collects food for the Vojaru (King). It is believed that the Vojaru knows the language of all birds and can foretell the coming danger.

The Jambili Athon is painted with a black dye, extracted from plants called So-ik or Kung-Kung. Fresh twig of the plants are put to fire, which in turn produce boiling sap in the other end. This sap is collected in a container, which turns black on cooling. Mustard oil is added to the sap, properly mixed and painted uniformly on the woodcraft. After drying, it is again rubbed with a soft clean cloth to give a shiny black colour. The Jambili Athon is decorated with an array of different objects, such as, cowries, shoots of certain plants, glasses, combs, etc. Carvings and ornaments however are not uniforms in all Jambili Athon. It is crafted by a skilled person called baroi. The origin and progressive use of Jambili Athon is based on legends. Some Karbis believe that it was used first as a stand to hang the bags of betel-nuts on it, in the fields while working in the field. Later, the Jambili Athon was exhibited at the Chomangkan (death ceremony of the Karbis) in a village under Chinthong Rongbong. Due to its beautiful carvings, the implement was highly praised by the social dignitaries of the region who decided to keep the craft with them by seizing it. To legitimate their act, they made a declaration that the common Karbis are not entitled to keep such a precious craft. The practice of exhibiting Jambili athon at the Chomangkan festival continued since then. On this occasion, the klengsarpo (the youth chief of the Karbis) raises the Jambili Athon on a sacred ground amidst beating of the traditional drums. The woodcraft remains exhibited from morning to evening. At the base of Jambili Athon...
Athon, the singers called Lunsepi sing the folk songs relating to the origin of the craft. A pair of Chong-nok (shield and sword) is also kept at the base of the Jambili athon. Moreover, the Jambili athon is also exhibited during the crowning ceremony of new traditional chief, in welcoming the dignitaries and respected persons. The Jambili Athon symbolizes the highest honour bestowed upon a person among the Karbis. As per customary laws, only selected cadres like baroi, habe and pinpo are entitled to keep the Jambili Athon in their houses. On necessary occasions, the incumbent parties can hire the craft for exhibition in Chomangkan and other such events. As understood by the Karbis now, this artifact depicts the philosophy of life and death, social institutions and religious practices and is thus claimed to be the symbol of pride and cultural identity of the Karbi people (Teron 2008, 105).

The dress pattern, specially the dresses of the women-folks is another site attached with Karbi ethnic discourse. Women are considered as the carriers of culture and tradition. In one hand, they are the pride and honour of community; and on the other hand, they create the feminine body in the community – how they should look like, what they should do and should not, what they should wear and what they should not. Ethnonational discourse standardizes the body and behaviour of woman. The bio-politics\(^5\) specially controlling of woman’s body, sexuality through different institutions like family\(^6\), marriage\(^7\), kinship\(^8\) (Rubin, 2006) are celebrated in nationality politics. In identity politics, women are imagined and decorated in specific national dresses. In the ethnic politics of Assam, illustrations can be seen in all the ethnic formations, like chadar mekhela of Assamese women, dakhana of the Bodo women, the pini-pekok of the Karbi women, etc. A news was in circulation regarding the decision of a college Authority of a college of lower Assam, where it was decided that students of the college must wear uniform in

\(^{5}\) Foucault conceptualized the idea of bio-politics which literally means controlling of one’s body.

\(^{6}\) Partha Chatterjee looks the role of family in Indian nationalism context.

\(^{7}\) Levi-Strauss argues that Marriage is the oldest form of gift exchange.

\(^{8}\) Gayle Rubin’s in her essay ‘Trafficking Women: Political Economy of Sex’ criticizes the kinship and gender discrimination.
the college premises. Particular dress code was also decided for male and female. Against the decision, many Bodo organizations came out in agitation demanding that dakhana should be dress for Bodo girl students in the college premises, where they didn’t talk about the dress of men. Such gender discrimination seems to be not an isolated case here, as the ethnic and national discourses often tend to validate such discrimination by hegemonic imposition of male and patriarchal subjectivities.

In the projects of ethnicity or identity politics, women always play a pivotal role; from taking the burden of preserving the cultural identity of the group to giving momentum to the ethnic upsurge in public spheres. Gender differentiation can be seen as an important part of any ethnic repertoire – which defines boundaries and reinforces ethnic differences. It is the culture that defines the masculinity and femininity, and the possible relations between the two, in any community. The ‘proper’ behaviour sanctioned by the society determines who belong to the collectivity and who do not. Women are considered as the carriers of culture – the culture of the community. It is ensured by marriage and divorce. It also ensures that the children born to those women are not only biologically but also symbolically within the boundaries of collectivity. Different women participate in ethnic movements in various ways according to their class, age and marital status. The role of women as reproducers, not only of the labour force and/or of the future subjects of the state, but also as the reproducers, biologically and ideologically, of the national collective and its boundaries. Women are thus unpaid keepers of culture and tradition. In a common parlance, it is assumed that in the project of identity politics/ethnicity or nationalism men and women are constructed differently as well both are included differently in the project. At such juncture, question arises whether ethnicity is a gender-neutral phenomenon or it actually validates the existing gender discriminations for the sake of tradition and identity.

In my fieldwork of this research, interviews were taken regarding the dress of the Karbi women. Both men and women were of the opinion that the Karbi
women should wear the traditional dress only to preserve the culture of the community. Especially in some occasions e.g. agitation programmes, community function, festivals, and rituals they must go with the traditional dresses. Many elderly women said that in their past they had used to wear *chadar- mekhela* also. But the girls of the young generation now seldom wear the *chadar-mekhela*; they hardly know how to wear it.

The material world of the urbanized middle class and elites appears to be a fusion of tradition and modernity, or it can perhaps be called as a kind of ethnicized modernity. Modernity in India, in substantial parts, is experienced as the acceptance of western materials and lifestyles at the cost of the traditional ones. However, in many ethnic situations, a hybridized version of tradition and modern, or local and the western, is seen to be in practice in the life-world of the affluent ethnic class. This is also applicable to the urban elites among the Karbis who prefer to make a more instrumental use of their Karbi ethnic identity in selected occasions. The symbolic or tokenistic use of items like Karbi muffler, traditional jackets and bags was mentioned earlier. Similarly, food and eating, internal decoration of domestic spaces, literature, arts and entertainment are also some of the sites where the urban elites demonstrate their traditional *ethnic-ness*.

5.4 Festivals:

Festival is an important component of any ethnic discourse, particularly in the sense that it serves as an effective advertisement of the ethnic identity. Ethnontionalism sometimes even invents festivals if necessary. *Bihu*, the agrarian ritual of Assam was converted into a national festival during 20th century only. Before that, Bihu had been looked down upon by the Assamese gentry till the late 19th and early 20th Century, considering it as vulgar of the illiterate folk (Dhekiyal Phukan in Tamuli 2005, 80). But, in due course Bihu became the national festival of Assam. The Karbi ethnicity also exploits different traditional festivals and rituals to show its distinctiveness. Some of
such traditional events which are now getting cultural prominence are Hachakekan, Sojun Puja Rongker etc. The Karbi Youth Festival is an example of officially created festival for promotion of ethnic identity.

In traditional Karbi society, Hachakekan is an important festival. It is a post-harvest festival incorporating songs and dances. After the harvesting is over, the Karbis perform the sok-keroi ritual where the dance of “Hachakekan” is performed. The dance is usually led by a singer called “Lunsepo”, remembering the great Karbi social reformer Rukasen by singing the song of “Lokhi Keplang” (Origin of paddy). Young people stretch their hands in the form of bird’s wing, tilting this way and that way; with synchronized movement of their feet. It typically starts in the evening and may continue for the whole night by changing of the dancing pairs one after another. The festival is best expressed through songs and dance. Nowadays, the “sok keroi” ritual is almost abandoned, but the dance of Hachakekan has become a standardized and stand-alone dance form. Affluent families invite the dance troupes after completion of the harvest, where village people also participate in the fun and merrymaking. It is believed that the dance of Hachakekan was first conducted in the house of Manik Bey-dum, and this tradition of Hachakekan is being continued since then, in every household of the Karbis, after the harvest.

5.4.1. Rongker

Rongker is an important religious festival of the Karbis which is observed annually in the village to satisfy the territorial deities for good harvesting as well as for over-all well-being in future. Though there is no fixed time and date for its celebration, the Rongker is mostly performed in the beginning of the year i.e. in the month of January or February which is practically the beginning of the Jhum cultivation.
Observation of the *Rongker* festival is done with the consensus of the people of the village as a whole. All the requirements of the rituals are assembled together by the people of the village. For performing this festival, first, the people of the village meet at the *Sarthe’s* (village Headman) house and discuss plans for effective celebration of the festival. The time and date of the festival is fixed after thorough discussion. As the festival involves animal-sacrifices and community-feasts, the amount of contribution to be made by each family is fixed in this discussion. Works such as collection of money and materials like bamboo, woods, etc. are done by the male members; and the women are usually entrusted in making *horlang* (rice beer) and *hor arak* (wine). The fixed place of performing the ritual is near the *Sarthe’s* house in the village known as *Rongker Anglong*. The place is believed to be sacred and is never used for other ordinary purposes. The cleaning of the place and the preparation of the altars are done by the male folks.

The festival begins with the rituals performed the previous night of the day of the festival, when the elderly folks of the village assemble to perform the ritual called *Seh Kasadi*. *Seh Kasadi* is the ritual performed to invite the deities to attend the festival on the following day. The ritual is performed by the *Kurusr* (Priest). He invites the deities by pouring *Horlang* in a leaf and offer to the deities with enchanting hymns.

On the next day, the core festival begins with the *Kasadi* again, at the Sarthe’s house. The male folk usually leave home for the place of performance and the women folk stay behind to cook rice for the feast to be followed after the ritual. On reaching the place of performing the ritual, the worship of the deities is again started by the *Kasadi* by invoking the deities. After that, the each of deities is worshiped one by one in the proper sequence. The deities worshipped during the *Rongker* vary from village to village as well as from region to region. However, the ancestor spirit like *Hemphu, Rasinja* and *Mukrang* and deities like *Longle A Hi-e* are worshipped in common.
In the festival, the deities are worshipped for the protection of the village from the natural calamities, diseases, and the wellbeing of the village people. It is done for maintaining peace and harmony with other communities around. Permission is sought from the deities for collecting goods from the forest and the fields, for the livelihood of the people. The goddess *Longle ahi-e* is worshipped for the protection of the crops in the field and to add manure to the soil of the land of cultivation. The people have deep faith that it is very necessary to appease the deities to have a good cultivation and to maintain peace and harmony among the people. As it is mentioned earlier, there was no fix date of celebrating the festival. However, when ASDC came to power in 1989, they fixed it on 5th January of every year. Since then, it was celebrated on that specific date in many villages. But the Congress party, after coming to power after the year 2000, changed the date to 5th February of every year, declaring it as a holiday on the calendar of the Council.

Besides promoting and celebrating such cultural activities, the drive for preservation and recording of such cultural traits is also going on. In the souvenir published by Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) in 2013, it has mentioned that the Department of Cultural Affairs keep on organizing trainings and workshops in different places on traditional folk song, folk dance, traditional drum beatings etc. Moreover, it also produced CDs, films, audio albums to preserve, protect and promote Karbi culture. Such productions and trainings standardize the folkloric forms and validate their authenticity.

5.4.2. *Karbi Youth Festival*:

An institutionalized enactment of the Karbi ethnicity through various cultural performances, at the macro level, was started in the late eighties of the twentieth century, under the name and style of Karbi Youth Festival (KYF). This has been a formal, and the most visible, cultural event celebrated every year to preserve and propagate the Karbi ethnic identity. Within the visual and
performative aesthetics of the KYF, one can discern the celebration of the Karbi selfhood and contestation/negation/negotiation of/with the dominant hegemonic discourses which the Karbis are always subjected to.

The official website of the KYF reflects this fact when it webcasts the following texts in its homepage:

“Once in the valleys, hill and plain of North-Eastern geography, there was a place called “Rongbin” and with the Rongbin the Karbis came the demographic movement in this last tip of south-east Asian cauldron was intense. Small indigenous groups were jostling each other from Vietnam to Burma, this was the period when Hindustan was being articulated from the earlier Bharatvarsh, small nationalities like the Karbis were becoming part of the fringe in the pantheon of greater Indian historiography. However, in the Indian North-East karbis didn’t have to jostle with. Being the earliest settlers, their existence was in complete consonance with nature, green forests, rivers and Karbis never acted like Coumbus! But with the onslaught of ‘civilization’ every Karbi arlen has become marginalized. Once a Karbi rong (village) Kuwehonchi (Guwahati) is now a concrete jungle. Only the names of some dingy and obscure by-lanes betray the wounded past. Once a Karbi habitat, Kajir-arong has become distant and disdainful. Karbis are everywhere, from Manipur, Nagaland Cacher, Meghalaya to Arunachal, We are not exclusive…rather we’ve been always inclusive, embracing culture and people...but only paid back in discrimination, displacement and dispossession! Today, the land that we call ours is encroached upon and there are more strangers than kinsmen. Where have they all gone?? We are still looking for them, in the hills and plains and valleys!!Welcome to Karbi Anglong…”

This hyper-textual piece can be read as an effective summary of the core Karbi ethnic sentiments in current times. It begins by specifically locating the Karbis within the historical, geographical and ethno-demographic particularities of the North-East India. By calling the Karbis themselves as small nationality in the fringe of the greater Indian historiography, a negotiation has been made between the perception of the Karbis as distinct and self-sufficient in one hand,

---

and a part of the greater Bharatvarsh (India) on the other. This also involves a valorization of the Karbi past where the Karbis are seen as the first settlers in Assam. Unlike the other communities who had to jostle with each other in the great political dramas of Indian history, the emergence and continuity of the Karbis on Indian soil were rather in full harmony with the forests and rivers of the land. The reference to Columbus has something to do with a highly politicized reading of an article written by Bishnu Prasad Rabha which was discussed earlier in this chapter. What is more eloquent in this text is the betrayal caused by civilization that caused the marginalization of the Karbis in later times. There are also claims that some of the important locations of present times, like Guwahati and Kaziranaga, were once part of the Karbi territory.

Karbi Youth Festival is celebrated during 15-19 February every year. A permanent site has been developed near to Diphu town at Taralangso. The Karbi Cultural Society, which was established in 1977 to preserve and propagate Karbi culture among the youths, organized the KYF first in the late 1980’s. By now, it has become a grand annual celebration of the Karbis to showcase their cultural resources publicly.

As evident in my interviews, the KYF is an important occasion for the Karbis, especially the younger generation. This provides a platform to explore the primordial ties and also to renew the existing ones between different generations and geographies.

5.5 Analysis of Karbi Culturalism

In a telling account, J. L. Dawar described how the nationalist discourse and cultural hegemony of the Indian state were transplanted through various bureaucratic machineries, institutional education, popular cultural means like radio and films, in the context of Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA) after the independence of India. However, these strategic means and forms of the
nation-building process later became the “tool for counter-hegemonic project on the part of the subordinate sections of the society vis-à-vis the dominant group. It is thus an area of negotiation between the two within which dominant, subordinate and oppositional elements are 'mixed' in different combinations” (Dawar 2007, 68). Dawar’s observation in the context of Arunacha Pradesh can further be extended to the various contemporary ethnocultural activisms in the North-East India, including the various cultural texts and performances of the Karbis mentioned above. These expressive cultural forms reflect the on-going negotiations of the concerned ethnic consciousness with the hegemonic forces – which are either in the form of nationalist impositions or, in recent times, the waves of globalization.

Investing in cultural symbolism for articulating ethnic identities is a common phenomenon in the politics of distinction in current times. Most often cultural products and performances are seen to be presented in spectacular forms to accomplish the desired political agendas, as evident particularly in the contexts like Karbi youth festival discussed above. Observing the fact that such ethnic spectacles are the events through which “a group represents itself to its own members and to non-members”, Bramadat has assigned four possible roles which these spectacles play in accomplishing the specific agenda of the concerned group. These four roles are: alternative economy of status, sites of dialogical self-definition, public education about ethnic identity and ethnic show business (Bramadat 2001, 3).

Bramadat’s scheme of analyzing ethnic spectacles fits well in interpreting the spectacular ethnicization of the Karbi cultural distinctiveness in current times. In relation to the first role what Bramadat calls as alternative economy of status, it can be said that the on-going cultural manifestations of the Karbis can be read as effective strategies to redefine its status as a distinct community within Assam and beyond. The high visibility provided by such cultural semiotics of the Karbis in post-independence times has successfully portrayed the Karbis as distinct and historically rooted community. The second role
played by such cultural exhibition as the sites of dialogical self-definition, in
the context of the Karbis, can be attributed to the fact that these organized
cultural performances indeed become a site to confront with the internal
heterogeneity, hierarchy and differences (in terms of, e.g., language,
geography, economy, clan/class, etc.). Internal negotiations regarding purity,
authenticity, etc. are facilitated by these cultural celebrations. An important
function that these cultural spectacles fulfil is the dissemination of the Karbi
ethnic consciousness across different generations and geographies, for both the
Karbis and the non-Karbis, which Bramadat calls as the public education
about ethnic identity. The fourth function assigned by Bramadat is the ethnic
spectacles as the instruments for ethnic show business. This is a crucial aspect
of this entire cultural extravaganza which needs to be looked from the
perspective of the profits which are more commercial than political. A definite
pattern of the culture industry and the heritage market is noticeable in the
Indian context, especially after the advent of globalization. This new pattern of
commodification and consumption involves re-packaging of the cultural
resources either for domestic consumption or to be exported abroad – which is
evident in the increasing number of organized festivals, both governmental
and private, and the various performance troupes which visit different parts of
the world.

The above-mentioned cultural expressions, in the forms of narratives and
iconography, seek to uplift the community towards a specifically politicized
ethnicity. The primordial ties in terms of sharing knowledge and worldviews
of the community which the members acquire before other identities (cultural
citizenship), are lifted for national imagination. The colonial hangover and
post-colonial disillusionment are the two factors that crucially determine such
ethnic mobilizations. Ethnicity or nationalism as an ideology gets elevated
with the socialization of ethnic markers. The religion, social memory, oral
tradition, social institution, material culture or other expressive behaviours
differentiate them from the intended others. Revisiting and reviving of those
narratives and iconographic markers make stronger the sense of *ethnic-ness*
and gives the scope to the elites and to the ethnic leaders for making a nation within a nation. As ethnic nationalism always involves inclusion and exclusion of people in reference to a sacralized territorial space – the homeland, hence in Karbi ethnonationalism is extensively a case of homeland imagined.