

An Approach to the Cultural Life of the Karbi People of Assam- A Discussion

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Abstract: The Karbi people are one of the ancient tribes living in Assam and other states of north East India-Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Their population is dominant particularly in the hill district of Karbi Anglong in Assam. Due to their separate ethnic identity as a tribe, the Karbis of Assam are a scheduled tribe and have got autonomy concerning exercise of political power as per the provisions of sixth schedule of the constitution of India. The tribe has its own colourful tradition and culture. Besides Karbi Anglong district, the Karbi people are found living in Biswanath Chariali, Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Hojai, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. They speak a language called Karbi-a language belonging to

Tibeto-Burman language family. The paper is an effort to introduce this ethnic tribe living in Assam and to provide an overview of their history, language, culture and traditions.

Key words: Karbi, Assam, Language, Tradition and Culture.

Introduction: The Karbi people are one of the ancient tribes living in Assam and other states of north East India-Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Their population is dominant particularly in the hill district of Karbi Anglong in Assam. They are one of oldest indigenous tribes of the north east India. Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the great artist referred the Karbis as the ‘Columbus of Assam’ [1]. Due to their separate ethnic identity as a tribe, the Karbis of Assam are a scheduled tribe and have got autonomy concerning exercise of political power as per the provisions of sixth schedule of the constitution of India. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council is the local-self government body through which the political power is exercised by the local people through their elected members. Besides Karbi Anglong district, the Karbi people are found living in Biswanath Chariali, Dima

Hasao, Kamrup, Hojai, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. They speak a language called Karbi-a language belonging to Tibeto-Burman language family. The tribe has its own colourful tradition and culture.

Objectives:

1. To introduce 'Karbi' as one of the dominant and oldest indigenous tribes of the North East.
2. To present an overview of the history, language, culture and tradition of the Karbi people living in Assam.

Methodology: Both primary and secondary sources used for collecting information and data while preparing the article.

Background: Earlier known as *Mikirs*, ethnically the Karbis belong to the Mongoloids while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Nowadays they do not use the term *Mikir* since it is considered as derogatory [2] and prefer to call themselves as Karbi or *Arleng* (literally means 'man' in Karbi language). The Tibeto-Burman speakers originally belonged to western China near the Yang-Tee-Kiang and the Howang-ho rivers and from these places they spread towards various regions around the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin, and the Irrawaddy and entered India and Burma. They used to live on the north bank of the rivers Kopili and Kolong and in course of time, during the reign of the Kachari kings, they moved to the hills. Some of them entered the Jaintia hill and settled in the then Jaintia kingdom. A group of these people remained in the Jaintia kingdom while others moved towards north east and crossing the river Borapani, entered the Rongkhang ranges and settled there. Some of the Karbis migrated to the Ahom kingdom and faced the Burmese invasion of Assam. The Burmese perpetrated inhumane oppression on the people. So, the Karbis sought refuge in the deep forest and finally some entered the western Assam as well as the others settled in the north bank of the Brahmaputra.

Tradition and Culture: The Karbi people have a very rich, colorful tradition and culture. This is evident in the lifestyle and various rites and rituals observed by these people. In this respect, a brief discussion is presented below.

Clan system

The clan system is very strictly followed by the Karbis. There are five major Clan or Kur play a vital role in the social norms of their patriarchal society. The five clans are-

- . Enghi (Lizang)
- . Terang (Hazang)
- . Rongpi (Ezang)
- . Teron (Krozang)
- . Timung (Tugzang)

Marriages between members of the same clan are prohibited because they are considered as brothers and sisters amongst themselves. But marriage between cousins (between a man and the daughter of his maternal uncle) is very much favored as like love marriages. Although a patriarchal society, after the marriage neither man nor woman has to change the surname. However, the children of a couple would inherit the surname of the father.

Festivals

The Karbi people celebrate many festivals such as Hacha-Kekan, Chojun, Rongker, Peng Karkli, Thoi Asor Rit Asor, Botor Kekur etc. These festivals have specific purposes. For example, Rongker is celebrated either on 5 January or on 5 February as per the convenience of the villager to thank gods and to ask for their assurance to protect them from any evil or harm that may happen to the village. Similarly, Botor kekur is celebrated for praying god to grace the earth with rain so that crops could be sown. The Chomangkan (also known as "thi-karhi") is another important festival of the Karbis performed by a family for the peace and the safe passage of the soul of those family members who died recently or long ago.

Religion

The Karbis are generally followers of Animism. However, the influence of Sanatan dharma, many have begun worship or prayers as per the Hindus. There are the followers of Christianity who were converted due to the influence of Christian missionaries. A data concerning the religious faith of the Karbi people is presented in the table below [3]:

Religion among Karbis	
Religion	Percent
<u>Animism</u>	84.64%
<u>Christianity</u>	15.00%
Others	0.36%

Language

The Karbis use their native language called Karbi at home and while speaking with fellow Karbi people. They are well versed in Assamese which they use as a lingua-franca to communicate with other communities in Assam. “The Karbi language shows two principal dialectal variations: Plain Karbi and Hills Karbi. Karbi living in plains come into close contacts in their daily life with the local non-Karbi population who speak other languages like Assamese, Hindi, Bengali etc. The spoken tongues of these languages have influenced the spoken variety of the Karbi language. This way the Karbi spoken in the plain district shows some differences with that of the hill areas. The minute investigations and extensive field studies among the Karbi people will give some data to trace out some more dialect variations of Karbi language.” [4]

Dress [5]

As a very important element of culture and tradition dress plays a vital role on the life of the Karbis. Dresses are prepared according to sex, age etc. which is discussed below.

Male costume:

Choihongthor: A jacket called *Choihongthor* is generally worn by married males which is slightly longer than other varieties such as *Choi'ik* (Black Jacket), *Choi'ang* (Red Jacket) and *Choi-Kelok* (White Jacket) or *Choi'umso* (Smaller Jacket). Married males generally wear the *Choi'ang* (Red jacket) while the *Choi'ik* (Black Jacket) is worn on festive occasions by young unmarried males over *Choi'ik* and *Choi'Kelok*. *Choi-Kelok* and *Choi'umso* are also worn by unmarried males. *Choi'umso* is a slightly shorter jacket with long braided lower fringes which is worn by unmarried males in festive occasions and during dances. *Choi'ang* is worn by married males, particularly those of higher status. The *Recho* (King), *Pinpo* (Courtiers), *Habe* (Governors of territorial divisions below the king and his courtiers), *Rong Asar* (Village Headman) and *Arleng Kesar* (Elderly Males) are entitled to wear this *Choi'ang* (Red Jacket) which carries with it status and prestige.

Pehseleng: It is a long white woven cloth worn both by males and females as a kind of shawl. The Karbi Bachelors wear it as an exclusive costume for them. The cloth cannot be worn by married males.

Rikong: "Ri" is cloth and "Kong" comes from "Jikong" (Firmiana Colorata) which is a slim piece of cloth worn by males which has varieties such as *Rikong Bamon*, *Rikong Ke'er* (Red Colored), and *Rikong Kelok* (White Colored). *Rikong Bamon* is worn by elderly males including priests. *Rikong Ke'er* and *Rikong Kelok* are distinctive as they carry woven motifs. The red variety is worn by elderly males while the white variety is worn by bachelors.

Poho: It is a woven turban, long enough to fold around the head and it is an exclusive male costume worn in festive and formal occasions such as *Adam Asar* (Traditional Karbi Weddings), *Chojun* (Ritual Ancestor Worship) or when an elder or a guest is offered a mandatory of homemade brew. *Poho* is part of a man's standard costume which has color significance. Bachelors wear the white colored *Poho* while the elderly males wear the red colored *Poho*. The white colored *Poho* carries more cultural and hierarchical significance which is worn by traditional dignitaries such as the *Recho* (King), *Pinpo* (Courtiers), *Habe* (Territorial Governors), and *Rong Asar* (Village Headman). *Arleng Kesar* (Elderly Males) would carry a red turban on their right shoulder like a fashion statement.

Chepan: An exclusive costume for bachelors *Chepan* is a strip of woven cloth (slightly smaller than *Poho* in breadth but longer). *Chepan* has other regional variations but are usually worn in the same fashion. A bachelor also wraps around a *Chepan* over his *sator* (like dhoti) which he flaunts in festivals and formal occasions.

Jambili: It is a piece of rectangular woven cloth which is folded with the four opposite corners and tied in such a way as to allow one arm to slip through and make it appear like a bag. In olden days, before the stitched modern bags appeared, males used *Jambili* as a multi-purpose bag which allowed the carrier freedom to shove in items from any of the four open sides.

Vojaru Ani: It is the tail of a 'racket tailed drongo', which is a highly prized gear for bachelors with status such as *Klengsarpo* (Chief) and *Klengdun* (Deputy) of the traditional Youth Dormitory or *Jir*. The racket tail gear carries specific cultural, ritual and hierarchical significance for the wearers.

Pehlu: A thick woven rectangular cloth used as a traditional bed sheet enjoying a high social status which is compulsory during traditional wedding and death rituals. *Pehlu* is also used as a sack for carrying paddy during harvesting. A household is said to be orderly if it uses *Pehlu* the whole year round. *Pehlu* has gender-specific identities. *Pehlu* for male use is called *Pehlu Marlak*.

Jarong/Jamborong: It is a trendy and decorated bag with a strap that the Karbi male wears over his left shoulder. The popularity of the *Jarong* has replaced the use of the *Jambili*. A *Jarong* or *Jamborong* may nowadays be used by both male and female.

Female costume: [6]

Pehkok : It is part and parcel of a modern Karbi female costume. It is worn around the upper body with the upper ends of the garment separating on the right side and tied on the right shoulder to above knee length. It has many color-combinations and each one is thus named differently with varying cultural codes and significance. *Pehsarpi*, a *Pehkok* of red and black color combination is worn by older women while *Pehloru* is a combination of white and off black (Greyish Hue). *Pehkok Jangphong* is a mix of red and yellow color which is worn by unmarried women. *Pehkok Khonjari* is worn both by young married and unmarried women.

Pini Kamphlak: It is the quintessential fashion statement for a Karbi woman irrespective of age or social positions. *Pini Kamphlak* is a rectangular piece of thick cloth worn over the lower body from the waist till the calf. *Pini Kamphlak*, *Pehkok* or an upper garment draped around the body, a *Vamkok* or belt with intricate designs and a blouse form the essential fashion of a Karbi woman. *Pini Kamphlak* has varieties such as *Honki Ranchom*, *Aphidop*, *Kaparenso*, and *Pejangre* etc. *Pini Langpong* is another variety made of the same fabric and thickness, but like a lungi, it is cylindrical.

Rumpan or Vambok : An essential component of female clothing, *Rumpan or Vambok* is almost like a belt and serves the same function to fasten the *Pini* (sarong) around the waist. *Vamkok* has also many varieties such as *Vamkok Ponglangwith* and *Bermum*.

Jir'ik : A traditional Karbi female costume *Jir'ik* is smaller and shorter in size than the *Piba* and is used for carrying a baby on the back.

Peh'um: It is a warm cloth worn during winter and is generally made from silkworms. *Peh'um* has varieties such as *Peh'honki aseleng*, *Peh'honki arpum* (two stitched together), and *Rinditho* which is divided into two segments with one segment in white while the other is a mix of white and red color. This design is also known as *Pematvi* because of the two segments which are distinctively separate and different. *Peh'um* is not gender sensitive and is worn by both males and females. *Atahu Pangdeng* is also a variety of *Peh'um*, also divided into color-separated segments.

Economy: The Karbis practice *Jhum* cultivation which is their traditional method of agriculture- the main source of earning. They grow variety of crops which include food grains, vegetables and fruits. The Karbi people are quiet self-sufficient with their agricultural products.

Conclusion: The Karbi tribe follows equality in respect of the status of male and female members of society. So, they enjoy a rich socio-cultural life where all irrespective of sex, age and financial status participate in social gatherings. Generally, no discrimination is noticed concerning status of people in the society. The social norms are followed by everyone and village head is the chief authority of the village whose order nobody can disregard. Due to such reasons, the Karbi people lead a very ordered socio-cultural life.

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