

Karbi Folk Literature:
A Study from Historical perspective

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ABSTRACT

The historical myths and legends, tales and songs of the Karbis represent their days of remote and recent past narrating the tales of their mythical and legendary figures and historical episodes, their ancient days of glory and struggle, pains and agonies, sorrows and sufferings, their migration from place to place constituting the oral history of the community. The main contribution of their folk narratives lies in its role of transmitting their folk way of life and the total indigenous environment with its pain and glory to the younger generation of the community, familiarizing them with legendary figures and their contribution to the community and socializing and assimilating them with their own culture and tradition, history and identity. Karbi nationalism grows from and develops through their field of folklore and inspires them to be identified with their own folkloristic and historical resources. The plurality and diversity of the Indian self rests with convolution of peripheral resources.

Key Words: Karbi folklore and folk literature, oral history and historicity, Karbi nationalism and Indianness.

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The culture and history of Assam starts with that of the ethnic communities in the state. The Karbi community, a major constituent of the greater Assamese identity, may not have a written history of their ancient days but is proud to have a good number of myths referring to their socio-cultural history, historical tales and legends representing their ancient days of glory and struggle, funeral songs narrating their tales of migration constituting the oral history of the community. In the present techno-based world where every young mind seems to be cut off from his or her root, Karbi folk literature can inculcate in their younger generation a sense of community consciousness and make them proud modern living with their own culture and history. The prime objective of the paper is to make a study of Karbi folk literature from historical perspective with a view to understanding historicity sustained in their folk literature, the community's voice of the past and its role in shaping their present.

The earliest inhabitants of Assam were certainly the tribes who came into this north eastern part of India from central Asia in successive waves of migration. One of the earliest groups of those Tibeto-Burman¹ speakers inhabiting Assam were the Karbis whose original home was in western China². Bishnuprashad Rabha called the Karbis the 'discoverer of Assam' and conferred the Columbus title on them.³ Dharamsingh Teron critically reads the 'Columbus title' and says that like Columbus the Karbis did not 'colonize', but have been 'colonized, divided, dispossessed, and deprived'.⁴ The title was not an imposition but recognition of a peripheral reality. The earliest historians ignored the richness of the so called 'little tradition' and importance of tribal history in constituting the identity of the country. In Assam, B. K. Barua was one of the earliest exceptions who tried to establish the identity of Assam and Assamese community in pan Indian perspective not merely working on its Aryan link but capitalizing on its folkloristic uniqueness in its diverse tribal culture, rich tradition, oral literature, linguistic varieties and indigenous religions with a view to making the strong Indians feel the beauty of Indianness through the strength lying at the margins.

It is difficult to say in certain about their early settlement for the absence of any written literature and archaeological evidence. Here Karbi folklore and their folk literature may

help to reconstruct the early history of the community. P.C. Chaudhuri rightly says ‘... the origin, antiquity and ancient history of the Karbis are still in dark. We would make a good beginning if a drive be given for the collection of all kinds of their folk-tales and stories, for therein may be found some missing links throwing light on the period of their migration, settlement and their organized socio-economic life and political organization.’⁵ J. Gogoi, working on Karbi belief and their folk song, is of the view that the hill called Nongpilar situated in the north eastern part of the region was the earliest settlement of the community in the state from where they came down and settled in the hill named Lumbajong lying between Dimapur and Diphu.⁶ G.C. Medhi states that the early habitat of the Karbis was in the hilly region between the Nagaon and Sibsagar (present Jorhat) districts in and around the forest Kajiranga which was named after a Karbi lady Kajir. ⁷ Morningkeey Phangcho too relying on Karbi folktales says that the Karbis were the earliest settlers of the areas around the rivers Kalang and the Klopili and the entire Kaziranga regions.⁸ Stack and Lyall, the first to state historical significance of Karbi folklore, said – ‘The traditions of the race point to the Eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, bordering on the Kopili (or Kupli) river (where many still remain), as their original abode.’⁹ It is right that the Karbis migrated from place to place and finally settled in Karbi Anglong the hill called after their name. Apart from Karbi Anglong district the other areas inhabited by the Karbis are Nagaon, Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Morigaon, Golaghat, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam and Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi and East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya.

Karbi Folklore may be studied in terms of folk literature, material culture, and social folk custom and performing folk arts of the community concerned.¹⁰ Karbi folk literature can be broadly divided into five categories¹¹ - folk tales, folk songs, riddles, proverbs and finally charms. The myths of the Karbi community are resourceful enough but inculcate in the younger generations a quest for their past and ancestors, sociology of their fore-fathers, material culture and social custom of their past, to know their land with its indigenous form, culture and tradition and above all these tales give birth to an earnestness to reread their past and reconstruct their socio-cultural history from below. The creation myth¹² advocating creation of plants and animals first before creation of the first Karbi suggests lofty environmental values, while another version of creation myth¹³ stating that the first Karbi came out slowly from the biggest egg laid by the bird ‘Plakwuk’ suggests their ethnocentrism and sense of hesitation has been with the community since the birth of the first one. The myth of Rukasen¹⁴ projects woman’s role in the process of village formation while the myths of Hemphu and Harbamon¹⁵ formulates beliefs and values, codes and custom for the community.

The myth of We Longbi and Har Longbi¹⁶ raises a voice against war and pollution and advocates for cultural assimilation, and the myth of Thireng-Wareng¹⁷ introduces the death ritual for the Karbis. These tales are instrumental in understanding the community and their cultural history.

The Karbi Legends are considered true by the community and transmitted orally from one generation to another with a view to making the new generations of the community aware and be proud of their glorious and eventful, happy and painful past and to live with their rich tradition and folk values. The legend of Rengbonghom¹⁸ narrates the deeds of their king Rengbonghom who constructed legendary capital Socheng and abolished the capital punishment. The legend of Thong Nokbe¹⁹ records the heroic deeds of their hero Thong Nokbe became the commander of the Jaintia armed forces and killed the Jaintia officials who humiliated the Karbi workers. The legend of Waisong²⁰ refers to a great Karbi warrior known as Waisong who took revenge by attacking the Khasia villages one after another and established a liberal state for the Karbis. The legend of Rongpherpi Rongbe²¹ narrates how Rongpherpi, a bold Karbi woman, violently protested and killed the soldiers of the Kachari king when they demanded milk from her breast to feed the tiger of the king. The legend of Larbin-Lirbon²² narrates how the two Karbi girls saved the lives of their villagers from the Khasi soldiers at the cost of their lives. The legend of Disumai Rongpi²³ narrating the tragic tale of Disumai and Didi refers to how for the first time in a Karbi tradition 'Jirsong' the bachelors' dormitory was established at the village Teron Rongsopo with nineteen office bearers for six years. The legend of Dimmir²⁴ narrates the tale of sorrows and sufferings, courage and mental strength of the beautiful Karbi woman Dimmir, the victim of the strong male's conspiracy. The legend of Serdihun²⁵ narrates the tragic tale of master weaver Dihun and introduces art of weaving, the art of their indigenous dying system and floral design in their costumes. In The legend of Dengrali²⁶ the victim girl got herself transformed into a tree and initiated the ritual of worshiping a tree in Karbi culture. In The legend of Sirwomu²⁷ it is said that Chir Tokbi of Socheng Dhenta village of Nagaon district killed the two giant 'Womu' birds who made the life of the Karbis a hell and saved the community and later came to be known as Sirwomu.

These legends in a Karbi tradition are told not merely to amuse but to inform their new generations of their great ancestor-warriors who sacrificed their lives for the community and thus to get the new generations inspired with local and national spirit, love for the community and legendary heroes. Further the legends are told to give the new generation exposure to some important historical facts, events, influential figures, strengths and weaknesses, internal and

external dangers and insider and outsider's views. The Karbi legends play the role of oral history of the community. Being inspired by Jacob Grimm, Linda Degh says that the magic tale expresses the escape from reality while the legend faces the facts of reality.²⁸ The Karbi legends too are the records of reality, expression of awe and sufferings, anger and anguish, exploitation and humiliation, valour and freedom of the community. Comparing a legendary hero to that of a folktale Linda Degh says that the folktale hero is blindly guided by advice and tasks while the man in the legend acts according to his own initiative and satisfies his hunger for acquiring knowledge about the unknown.²⁹ In case of Karbi legends the characters instead of hanging after acquiring knowledge about the unknown are more concerned with the well being and security of the Karbis, freedom and identity of the community and remain busy in conflict with the oppressive neighbours. The legendary figures like Thong Nokbe, Waisong, Rongpherpi Rongbe, Larbin and Liorbon sacrificed their lives in their conflict with outsider oppressors and are concerned with well-being, happy and peaceful living of their people. A scientific and systematic study of these historical legends may lead to construct early history of the community.

Apart from legends there are certain Karbi folk tales characterized with historical elements of local importance which can be grouped as Karbi historical tales. Such a historical tale is The Legend of All Women Village³⁰ which narrates how the women folk saved their village Arkli-Arklo and leaves scope for historians to reread the Karbi women village in relation to the 'Women Kingdom' leaving its trace in 'Baduli-Khurung' at Kondoli, Nagaon. Another tale The Legend of Baby Hill³¹ records the plight of a mother and the patriarchal Karbi society's indifferent attitudes towards the rights of women. Similarly the tales telling how the names Mikir-Hat, Ling-Lang and Kaziranga³² came into force have local historical importance.

In traditional Karbi society, every occasion is a ritual and every ritual is an occasion. Recitation of Muchera Kehir is an important aspect of Chomankan festival. The 'Chumangkan Keparju Aloh' celebrated at Socheng Dhenta, Nagaon from 26th to 29th April/2015 was attended throughout. What was seen in the ritual a sense of collective urgency and liability energized with a sense of socio-democratic, cultural and religious values integrates the community into one platform with one purpose alone. The matter of a family gets transformed into a matter of community consciousness and social cohesion. Karbi nationalism has its root in Karbi folklore and grows from and develops through such folkloristic tradition and resources. At the day break of the last day of Chomankan all gather under the auspicious symbol of their culture 'Jambili Athon' and listen to Muchera Kehir narrating creation of Karbi

community and their world, their struggle of existence, migration from one place to another, exploitation and humiliation suffered at the hands of their neighbouring communities. So 'Muchera-Kehir' narrates the legend of Larbin-Lirbon inculcating the values of courage, sacrifice and unity. Muchera Kehir appears a voice against marginalization when it narrates their humiliation at the hands of Kachari king. Muchera Kehir, narrates the story of Rongferpi with a view to energizing the marginalized sections especially the women folk and the subdued ones of the community to protest and raise their voice against injustice and to live with respect and identity. Muchera Kehir also narrates the legend of Thong Nokbe who put an end to the torture and humiliation done to the Karbis by the Jayantia king³³. Here listening to the song and the tales narrated of their glories and agonies of the past the Karbis have been expected to understand themselves, their worldview, their past and present and thus develop in them a sense of belongingness to their community.

Karbi folk literature is also enriched with two Karbi folk epics - 'Sabin Alun' and 'Ha-i-mu'. 'Sabin Alun'³⁴, the Karbi Ramayana, is a purely Kabi world where the King and subjects are all peasants and the daughter of the king is proud to be an expert weaver. There is no mention of the banishment of Rama in the Karbi Ramayana for in Karbi context banishment had hardly any relevance where the community itself had to move from one place to another under compelling situation. Further here Ravana has many hands instead of many heads which metaphorically implies that the greatness of the Karbi Ravana refers not to his intellectual but physical strength and workforce in Karbi context. According to Birendranath Datta the basic theme of Ramayana the victory of goodness over evil force had direct appeal to the Karbi mind and the tragic element running through the story takes us to the most fascinating characteristic of karbi folklore and Karbi folk mind – a virtual obsession with tragedy.³⁵ Another folk epic of the Karbi community Ha-i-mu,³⁶ records the plight of the Karbi women, their anger and anguish, pains and sufferings at the hands of the powerful and promises hope in form of rain. The folk epics 'Sabin Alun' and 'Ha-i-mu' are the cultural document of the Karbis locating the Karbi nationalism in Indian context. The Karbi legendary ballads or historical ballads, based on legendary figures or historical events of recent past, are found in fragmentary form. The ballad of Reng Bangham³⁷ reflects the glorious past of the community when Reng Bongham was their king.

Study of Karbi folk literature is the study of the masses of the community, their worldview, migration and their earlier socio-economic cultural religious and political affairs which are to reorient the young minds of the community as well as outsiders to understand the history of the community from the below. The Karbi historical myths and legends, tales and

songs are reflective of their love for tradition, respect for their glorious past, and respect for their local or national historical figures are the loftiest Karbi values which the new generations of the community must inculcate in them in their search for identity. They like to live with their history, the pleasures of the triumphs and pains and agonies of their sufferings. The Karbi Folk prose narratives right from the myths to the tales reflect the Karbi folk society and its folk life since its inception up to this present form going through different stages of evolution. If the myths document the earliest Karbi worldview and process of living together the legends give birth to national spirit and community consciousness in the minds of the Karbis. On the other hands the tales depict a Karbi folk society with the community's wish fulfillment, dreams and fears, sociology and psychology, culture and tradition, socio-cultural religious phenomena, political crisis and hope for a better day. Similarly their historical folk song like Mechera Kehir can rightly be called the Oral History of the Karbi community with the sense of historicity prevailed throughout, historical life of the community with reference to their legendary figures, historical characters, events and relation with other communities of the region, their establishment of kingdom and migration, of their battles won and lost, their socio-cultural political affairs. The main contribution of those narratives lies in its role of transmitting their folk way of life and the total indigenous environment, introducing them to their original worldview and familiarizing them with their mythical and legendary figures socializing the younger generation of the community and assimilating them with their own culture and tradition. The narratives are told to the young minds with a view to making them know their past, understand the present and preparing them for the future inculcating in them the socio-ethical, cultural, environmental, political values nourished by the community for long.

We are living in an age where every individual owns a tendency to go away from his or her root, the Karbi folk literature can save the Karbi society from more degeneration inculcating in the minds of the youngsters of the community a sense not to be mere commodity in the present age of consumerism and reorienting them towards a life to live with their indigenous values, culture and heritage. The outsider can read their deities from their window but cannot read 'Sabin Alun' ignoring its role in understanding diversity in Indianness. With the repository of their folk values the Karbis may emerge in Indian scenario with a unique contribution to the formation of Indian identity at large instead of remaining at the receiving end of Indian ideology. The plurality and diversity of the Indian self rests with convolution of peripheral resources.

This study not simply exposes the richness of Karbi folk literature in terms of historicity sustained, but leaves certain questions unanswered - what are the contributions of the Karbis

to the Assamese culture and nationality? And the same question needs to be extended and scientifically addressed in the context of global India. What is precisely there in the cultural and political history of Assam and India as well that represents the Karbis and their land? The Karbis are not happy with the occasional recognition of their needs and rights and carefully made explanation of their culture and history by the advocators of the elite centre. Rather it should be acknowledged that they are undoubtedly a strong peripheral reality contributing to constitute Assamese and Indian culture and nationality with their own identity, culture and history.

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3. Biren Sing Ingti, Khanajan Karbi gaon, Chapanalla, Nagaon.
4. Shyam Bey, Jiajuru Karbi gaon, Jiajuri, Nagaon.
5. Dhiren Teron, Balijuri Mikir gaon, Balijuri, Nagaon.

Glossary:

Chomankan : Karbi cremation ceremony.

Dengrali	: A legendary Karbi woman figure who reduced herself to a tree out of shame of being pregnant caused by her socio-culturally strong maternal uncle.
Didi	: A legendary Karbi woman figure who led a humiliated life marginalized by the male leaders of their bachelors' dormitory.
Harbamon	: The first Karbi social organizer.
Har Langbe and Be Longbe	: Two Karbi legendary brothers who introduced marriage rules and regulations to Karbi society.
Hi-mu	: Karbi folk epic about a legendary Karbi woman figure who suffered at the hands of socio-culturally strong males.
Hemphu	: Karbi god.
Jirsong	: Bachelors' dormitory of the Karbis.
Ling-Lang	: Name of a market at Tapotjuri near Chapanalla, Nagaon.
Mikir-hut	: A market place at Puranigudam, Nagaon.
Musera-Kehir	: A song narrating the tale of migration sung on cremation ceremony.
Reng Beng Ham	: A legendary Karbi king.
Rongpherpi	: A legendary Karbi woman who killed Jayantia soldiers protesting humiliation.
Rukasen	: A legendary village organizer popularly known as Grandfather Kashen.
Sabin Alun	: Karbi Ramayana
Sat Recho	: A legendary Karbi king.
Socheng	: A legendary capital of the Karbis established by king Rengbengham
Socheng Dhenta	: Name of a Karbi village at Nagaon.
Thong Nokbe	: A legendary Karbi hero.
Wo-pluk-pi	: A kind of bird.



**PHOTOS OF 'JAMBILI ATHON' AND
RECITATION OF 'MUCHERA KEHIR' UNDER 'JAMBILI ATHON'**

ON THE FINAL DAY OF 'CHOMANGKAN'
CELEBRATED AT SOCHENG DHENTA, NAGAON, ASSAM
FROM 26th TO 29th April, 2015



'JAMBILI ATHON'



RECITATION OF 'MUCHERA KEHIR' UNDER 'JAMBILI ATHON'