

Social Custom of the Kabis: A Study within Folkloristic Perspective

Introduction: The culture and history of Assam starts with that of the ethnic communities in the state. Assam, in its present reduced form, is still the home of more than 23 tribes such as Boro, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Dimasa, Tiwa, Deori, Sonowal-Kachari, Garo, Chakma, Hajong, Hmar, Naga, Lusai, Pawi, Synteng, Barman, Kuki, Lakher, Man, Mech, Hojai, Khasi-Jaintia etc. Apart from Karbi Anglong the other areas inhabited by the Kabis are Nagaon, Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Morigaon, Golaghat, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts of Assam and Jayantia Hills, Ri Bhoi and East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya. The Kabis are racially Indo-Mongoloid and linguistically belong to Kuki-Chin group of languages, one of the prime divisions of Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan family of languages.¹ They entered into Assam from central Asia in one of the early waves of migration. Bishnuprashad Rabha called them the ‘discoverer of Assam’ and conferred the Columbus title on them.² Mr. Dharamsingh Teron reacted with a cause – “Like Columbus, we Kabis did not ‘colonize’ but ... have been colonized, divided, dispossessed, and deprived.”³ However Rabha’s title was not an imposition but recognition of a peripheral reality made with a hope to constructing the history of the state from the below.

The folk society of the Kabis may be understood in terms of their folk literature, material culture, social folk custom and their performing folk arts.⁴ Karbi folk literature covers different types of myths, legends, tales, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, chants and charms transmitted orally from generation to generation. These were the result of collective effort of the community and reflective of their folk life. If folk literature of a community deals with the aural aspects of their folklife material culture refers to the visible part of folk life or physical folklife. Karbi material culture refers to the skills and techniques, methods and formulas, arts and crafts associated with the process of building of their traditional home or their bachelors’ dormitory, weaving of their traditional cloths, preparation of their folk dishes, farming and fishing, health and hygiene etc. which have been acquired by and transmitted across the generations throughout the ages. Karbi folk social custom refers to their indigenous socio-religious cultural way of life while their performing folk arts of the Kabis basically refer to their folk music, folk instruments and a variety of folk dances like ‘Songchingnang’, ‘Chong Kedam’, ‘Rong-Ketong’, ‘Ingtat-Seron’, ‘Kengtir-Kekan’, ‘Kengtir Kebane’, ‘Nimcho-Kerung’, ‘Banjar Kekan’, ‘Hacha Kekan’, ‘Lengpum-Sokchon’, ‘Akkaral Kekan’, ‘Domahi kekan’, ‘Amoi Moi Kikan’ etc. The prime objective of the paper

is to portray the Karbi folk society with a view to understanding the community with their own indigenous social custom at their own context.

Karbi Social Folk Custom: Richard M. Dorson says – ‘In between oral literature and material culture lie areas of traditional life facing in both directions. One such area we may call social folk custom. Here the emphasis is on group interaction rather than on individual skills and performances.’⁵ Karbi social folk custom refers to their indigenous institutions and socio-political system, traditional rites and rituals, festivals and celebrations, their folk games and recreations, their folk religion and modes of worship and their indigenous healing system.

Karbi Folk Institutions and Traditional Socio-Political System: The traditional Karbi state is characterized with democratic ideals and values, equal growth, fellow-feeling and a sense of cooperation. The traditional Karbi state is divided into three territories called ‘Alongris’ – ‘Rongkhang’, ‘Chinnthong’ and ‘Amri’ which are further divided into twelve sub-territorial divisions called ‘Longris’ – ‘Habepi’, ‘Sangkheli’, ‘Umaha’, ‘Rapati’, ‘Umlarang’, ‘Rongkhang’, ‘Rongcheiche’, ‘Rongpi’, ‘Nokberi’, ‘Dera’, ‘Kiling’ and ‘Unchera’. Each ‘Longri’ consists of a number of villages known as ‘Arong’. In this three tier structure of traditional Karbi state, the Karbi king known as ‘Lindokpo’ the Karbi ‘Recho’ is the administrative and judicial head of the entire state followed by ‘Habe’ and ‘Sarthe’ who are in charge of ‘Longri’ and ‘Arong’ respectively. Each of the ‘Alongri’ is administered by a council under the direct control of Karbi ‘Recho’. There are nine ‘Lindoks’ out of which the ‘Ranghang’ lineage provides the Karbi ‘Recho’ on a hereditary principle. Next to ‘Lindok’, the officials are ‘Dili’ and ‘Bey Bruteman’ followed by ‘Bor-Pator’, ‘Bor-Miji’ etc. The ‘Bor-Miji’s prime duty is to supervise if the affairs under the ‘Habe’ are running perfectly or not.⁶

‘**Mei**’ the Village Council is the traditional socio-political institution at the ground level in the Karbi state. It is constituted of the portfolios like ‘Sarthe’, the village Headman, ‘Kurusor’, the priest, ‘Richobacha’, the assistant village chief, ‘Ferangke’, the messenger and ‘Webarim’, the coach. The ‘Mei’ under the leadership of the ‘Sarthe’ performs various functions related to the socio-economic, judicial and religious activities of the villagers. The ‘Sarthe’ not only controls the day to day affairs of the villagers but also the inter-village and intra-village issues. The village headmanship is hereditary in character. Of course people can remove a ‘Sarthe’ if he is found inefficient. Another traditional institution of the Karbis is their bachelors’ dormitory known as ‘**Jirkedam**’ or ‘**Jirsong**’. It is the institution meant to train up the youths in all aspects of life –socio-cultural, economic, religious and agricultural,

handicrafts, community-oriented etc. and to inculcate in them the democratic values, sense of cooperation, fellow-feeling, work culture, folk art and craft and aesthetic sense. All the unmarried boys and girls of a village can become the member of the bachelors' dormitory of the village. The office bearers of the institution are – 'Kleng Serpo' (the chief), 'Klengdun' (the assistant), 'Sadar-Kethe' (commander), 'Sadar-Kecho' (assistant commander), 'Sengburup-kethe' and 'Sengburupcho' (drum beaters), 'Me Apai' (fire keeper) and 'Lang Apai' (water keeper) etc. **Kerung Amei**⁷ is the traditionally maintained grain bank of the Karbis based on fellow-feeling and co-operation. It is established with a view to helping the poor families during the lean months of the year.

The Karbis have a distinct **Clan System** and certain rules and regulations associated with. The community consists of five clans – 'Terang', 'Teron', 'Timung', 'Inghi' and 'Ingti'. Each clan has a certain branches. For example, 'Terang' has thirteen branches, 'Teron' has seven branches and 'Timung' has thirty branches while 'Inghi' and 'Ingti' clans are constituted of thirty and seven branches respectively. The Karbis strictly follow clan exogamy and consider a marriage between a boy and girl of the same clan a sin. The children belong to the clan of their father and own his property. The important point is that the clans of the girls after marriage are not changed and so they do not take their husband's surname. '**Kurkepon**' is another important feature and ritual associated with through which a child without a father or a non-Karbi person is converted to the Karbis and given a clan of the community.

Totem, one of the important features of a Karbi folk society, is an object of nature, may be a bird or a tree or an animal, adopted by the Karbis or by the members of a particular clan of the community as an emblem and believed to have spiritual meaning and metaphysical connection with them. The birds like 'Voterang', 'Vomumpo' and 'Voleng' are the totem for 'Terang' clan, 'Timung' clan and for the branch 'Ingleng' of 'Ingti' clan respectively. Similarly the trees like 'Lokron', 'Ingchum' and 'Arohi' are the totem for the clans 'Teron', 'Ingti' and 'Inghi' respectively.⁸ On the other hand, monitor lizard is the totem for the Karbis living in Killing region. The Karbis worship their respective totem and at no circumstance they are ready to harm their totem.

Karbi Customary Laws, properties of the community, are as follows⁹ –

- a. The Karbis follow the patrilineal system tracing their descent in the male line.
- b. After the death of the father the eldest son becomes the household, the owner of the father's all movable and immovable properties and owns the obligation to perform the

rites. But, if he marries a girl from the same clan he loses all right and in such a situation the next son inherits the property and the household as well.

- c. If there is no son in the family, after the death of the father, a daughter can inherit the parental property, but cannot become a household. In such a situation the nearest male relative from father's side own household and obligation to perform rites.
- d. Marriage is monogamy. Clan plays an important role in maintaining exogamy. 'Kursenem' the marriage between a boy and a girl of the same clan is a punishable crime. There is no bride price or dowry system.
- e. Divorce is permissible. After divorce, the husband and wife get the custody of grown up and minor children respectively. If she remarries, all her children are bound to go back to the father.
- f. Widow marriage is permissible. Junior levirate and junior surrogate are permitted. But at no circumstance the widow is allowed to marry the elder brother of her deceased husband. If a widow or a widower gets married violating the prescribed categories, they have to pay a fine fixed by the village head or council for acceptance.
- g. A widow is entitled to receive maintenance from the family of her deceased husband. If she remarries, she loses her right over her dead husband's property.
- h. The villagers hold full right over the land they use. They can cultivate or transfer the land to others.
- i. According the demand of a situation, the village head or 'Sarthe' or a group of 'Sarthe' in a village council prescribe punishment for the wrongdoers and provide justice to the victim.

There are certain **Codes of Conduct** traditionally followed by the Karbis in their folk society. The Karbi folk society is characterized with equality of all and equal growth for all and naturally free from politics of caste, colour and race. People especially the elders and office bearers are honoured in a traditional way according to their social designation, role played in the cultural and religious activities. There are different form of traditional honours such as 'Chi im Jirlang', 'Akjor', 'Toman', 'Banta', 'Horhak', 'Munchin', 'Akkeng Akbor' etc. well defined by the folk society. It is a code of conduct for the males involving in cultural and religious activities to wear their traditional dress and especially the turban according to their designation. The host in a feast should respect the tradition 'Ankelok' and use 'Sobak' in serving rice to the guests. The Karbi folk society is conscious of prestige and respect of women in their society. 'Nihu Sarkan' is one of such rule through which males are compelled to respect the ladies as they do with the wife of maternal uncle. Further the society stresses on

maintenance of a distance between a Karbi woman and her father-in-law or the elder brother of her husband.¹⁰

The Karbis believe that Hemphu incarnated among them as ‘Langmingpo’ and taught them certain **social ethics**. According to him one should always consider own self inferior to others, but show instance to others doing the best. He stressed on non-violence, equality of all, purity of body and mind and advised all to live together in peace with love and affection for each other. He encouraged people to work with patience and confidence, self-control, farsightedness and perseverance and faith on god. The **principles** advocated by Hemphu are – purification of body, mind and spirit, purity in whole life, nobility, humble and amiable nature, rejection of ill temper, self dependent, competitive spirit in mind and good sense, obedience, good dealing and self confidence.¹¹ These teachings are the backbone of the Karbi folk mind and Karbi folk society.

Another important aspect prevailing in a Karbi folk society is the **tradition of fortune telling** by the diviner. There are two kinds of diviner- ‘Lodepi’ the female diviner and ‘Sang Kelang Abang’ the male diviner. They can talk with the ancestors and deities and predict the cause of a disease and distress of a family. The diviners use different elements such as ginger, bamboo, turmeric, tulsi leaf, egg, betel-leaf etc. for the purpose. In a crucial situation, in a Karbi tradition, there is also a system of taking oath with a handful of earth in order to prove righteousness or honesty.¹²

(b) Karbi Rites and Rituals, Festivals and Celebrations: Folk festivals are constructed as symbolic representations of the situations that the folk like to occur. For the Karbis each occasion is a ritual and each ritual accompanied with songs and dance is a celebration whether purification or worship, related to birth, marriage and death or agriculture or season is constituted of various cultural-religious components and integrates the community into one.

Purification enjoys great importance in a Karbi tradition. ‘Klongko Athekar’ is the process of purification of the body of a new born baby and ‘Adam Athekar’ is the process of purification of bridegroom while ‘Ak Hung Athekar’ is the process of purification of poaching animal or the purification of fish found after fishing in a river and ‘Kethi Athekar’ is the process of purification of the dead body of a person died premature or unnatural. Similarly ‘Karkli Athekar’ is the process of purification of the flesh of a sacrificed animal or anything offered to god and ‘Kesso Athekar’ is the process of purification of meal before taken.¹³ These rituals of purification are reflective of the community’s stress on purity of body, mind and everything around them.

The Karbis are known for their unique tradition of **rites and rituals related to Birth, Marriage and Death**. When a child is born the Karbis welcome the child with an incantation 'Karbi aso, Karbak aso ... Pirthe kahase, minder kahase' that the child born is none but a Karbi child who has come to make relation with maternal uncle, brother and sister and with the society.¹⁴ Thus the process of assimilation of an individual with society and culture starts right from the moment of birth itself. They purify the child performing 'Klongko Athekar' and celebrate the naming ceremony of the child called 'Acho Amen Ki ir' with songs and dance. After six months, for the welfare of the child they perform rituals for the appeasement of the deities 'Phalongsor Ahi I' and 'Ap Aphi'.

Marriage in a Karbi tradition is a socio-cultural religious phenomenon characterized with honour and discussion, rites and rituals, belief and tradition, songs and music etc. Marriage by negotiation or 'Adam Achar' in a Karbi folk society is characterized with 'Nengpi-Nengcho Kasingki', 'Kehang Kapatini', 'Ajo Arni Kepha', 'Wor Kamatha', 'Adam Athekar' etc.

- i. A symmetrical cross cousin marriage system is the most preferred type of marriage in Karbi tradition. A boy in a Karbi society is always expected to marry the daughter his mother's brother.
- ii. The Karbis prefer tribal endogamy and strictly follow clan exogamy. Marriage between a boy and girl of the same clan is strictly prohibited.
- iii. The practice of polygamy, child marriage, bride price, dowry system and divorce etc. are not favoured in Kabi folk society.
- iv. Widow marriage is preferred and she is expected to marry the younger brother, but at no circumstance the elder brother, of her husband.
- v. After marriage the girl does not change her clan and surname though her children take that of her husband.
- vi. The ritual 'Pechoricho Kasethon' is observed by returning the bridal dress to the parents of the bride with honour in a traditional way.
- vii. The maternal uncle is highly esteemed in a Karbi marriage.
- viii. 'Bongsin', 'Bongdam', 'Hor', 'Horhak', 'Noksek' etc. enjoy great importance in a Karbi marriage.
- ix. A married woman in a Karbi tradition maintains the rule 'Kaservi', i. e. while walking she is always in front of her husband but remains at the back with a male other than her husband. The young generation hardly follows the rule.

‘Chumangkan’ or ‘Karhi’ is the funeral ceremony of the Karbis. From structural point of view the ritual appears a unified text embodied in it lots of genres of Karbi folklore such as Karbi myth, legend, folk speech, sayings, charms and chants, folk costume, folk cookery, architecture, art and craft, folk religion, folk institutions, social customs, customary laws, folk music and dance forms etc. What is seen is a sequence of traditional behaviours or codes or signs with layers of meaning in relation to each other in terms of the ultimate meaning of the ritual. If we look at the pre-chomangkan behaviours, right from taking permission from village chief, series of discussions with and formal invitation to ‘Dihuidi’, ‘O’chepi’, ‘Charhepi’, ‘Obkopi’, maternal uncle, office bearers of bachelors’ dormitory, ‘Ari’, ‘Tirikam’, relatives etc. to the preparation of ‘Hem Hongthor’, ‘Hor’ and other food stuff and arrangement of rest camp for the guests and other necessary materials, the factor motivating the procession of preparation is a sense of collective urgency and liability on the part of the community to ensure the roaming souls of the dead their ultimate destination at the ‘ancestors’ land’. That collective liability energized with a sense of socio-democratic, cultural values, right and identity, commitment to belief and tradition, folk religion and folk way of life integrates the community into one platform with one purpose alone. The matter of a family gets transformed into a matter of community consciousness. The first day ritual of ‘Chomangkan’ known as ‘Rup-Kihum’ is constituted of a series of rituals such as – ‘Dihuidi-O’chepi Kele Aningwe’, procession to cremation ground, ‘Ru Kehum’, ‘Longle Adan’, ‘Kutak’, ‘Ankepi’, ‘Langketung’, ‘Chang ching nang’ dance, ritual with ‘Banjor’, back to home with the souls of the dead in the form of shells carried by ‘Obkopi’, rest on the way, honour to the souls of the dead at home, ‘O’chepi Changlang’, dead are brought to life by ‘O’chepi’ inserting the souls to their straw made images in tune with the lamentation songs sung by ‘Charhepi’ and are placed at ‘Hem Hongthor’ etc. O’chepi takes care of the dead providing them food and other necessary stuff and ‘Charhepi’ continues her lamentation songs creating the much needed atmosphere while others remain busy with the preparation for the rituals of next days. The next day ritual ‘Kanso’ is characterized with lamentation songs continued for the whole day making every visitor weep for the dead and preparing the ground for their final farewell. ‘O’chepi’ continues to serve the dead with food and other necessary things the whole day. The youths come from the house of the village head dancing ‘Chong-kedam’ and are honoured by the host and requested to take the charge of the ritual. The youths remain busy with preparation of ‘Banjor’ and other associated items, ‘Theri Hemkim’, ‘Woti Aum’, ‘Maidang Alangpong’, ‘Karchut Karbek’, ‘Banta Kebor’ etc. followed by a dance ‘Banjor-kekan’. The next ritual ‘Kanpi’ actually start from the evening

of the second day with 'Rong Ketong' the great procession of 'Tirikam' with respective 'Jambili Athon', honour to 'Tirikam', 'Chong Kedam' dance, 'O'chepi Kere Kiti' 'Nihu Singki', ritual with 'Mekbur Awa' and 'Mekbur Aseng', 'Kengtir Kekam', 'Rikeng Mesek Kethok' etc. capitalizing each sub-ritual in terms of making ground for reunion of the dead with ancestors and regeneration or subsequent return of the souls to their respective clans signified by the late-night ritual 'Nimcho-kerung' dance with the erotic 'Mi-ring-rang' songs. In the morning of the third day 'Nimcho-kerung' dance continues with greater number of participants. This part of the ritual suggesting regeneration may also be read as a fertility rite meant for abundance of harvest. 'O'chepi' dances 'Kengtir Kebane' and the 'Charhepi' continues her lamentation songs. The 'Nimcho-kerung' dance is followed by 'Sengpasedan', 'Chong-Kedam' or 'Chong-Nok Kekam', 'Banjor Kekam' and finally 'Muchera-Kehir' the legend of historical significance narrating their origin, migration, duties etc. On one hand 'Nimcho-kerung' signifies rebirth and regeneration while the ritual 'Rong Kethon' signifies the final farewell to the material life of the dead and their safe passage to 'ancestors' land'. In the ritual of the fourth day known as 'Thkup-Karkok' the relatives especially the sister-in-laws clean the environment and are honoured for their service. Further 'Ochepi', 'Charhepi', 'Dihuidi', 'Obkopi', 'Nihu' etc. are honoured in a traditional way and are thanked for their service in the whole ritual and formally given farewell. 'O'chepi' performs 'Munchin' tradition while receiving the honour. Thus 'Chomangkan' is a structural entity constituted of a sequences of traditional behaviours right from taking permission from the village chief honouring him in a traditional way up to 'Munchin' performed by 'O'chepi' and an understanding of these traditional components in relation to each other in the context of the whole ritual providing the souls of the dead a safe passage to the 'ancestors' land' and paving the door for regeneration provides better understanding of the ritual.

'Chajun', a socio-religious annual family festival, is performed to address the problems of the family concerned. In the process of celebration the family ritual gets transformed into a community festival. It is celebrated three times in successive three years worshipping the deities especially 'Barithe' in a Karbi tradition. The prime strength of the festival lies in its psychological treatment of the community and sociological function of promoting integrity of the community. **'Rongker'**, an annual socio-religious village festival, is celebrated with a view to appeasing agricultural and other deities for the wellbeing and welfare of the villagers and their crops as well. There are various types of 'Rongker' celebrated for different social causes, such as 'Than Rongker', 'Mavur Rongker', 'Pirda Rongker', 'Dengja Rongker' and 'Tongprop Tongso Rongker' etc. are for welfare of their

jhum cultivation, protection from epidemics, wellbeing of their people, protection from the neighbouring suppressors, from tiger and prevention from ethnic clashes. **‘Wolo Keter’**, **agriculture** related religious worship, is performed with a view to having rain on earth and flourishing their agriculture. It is the worship of the rain deity ‘Ha-i-mu’ or worship of nature suggesting a celebration of love and fertility. The Karbis, for curing a rare disease or the ‘maternal uncle searching disease’ of a child, perform a magico-religious ritual called **‘Nihu Kasiri’** comprising of a few sub-rituals – **‘Andum Kehang’**, **‘Arnam Kehang’**, **‘Peh Kehang’** and **‘Vo Kartap’**. The ritual with its mythical base shows the importance of maternal uncle in a Karbi tradition. In the ritual the problem of the family gets transformed into a matter of concern for the community inculcating the values of fellow-feeling, sense of cooperation and one community-one family concept. **‘Sar Kebat’** is the coronation ceremony of the village head in a Karbi village and the songs associated with the ritual are known as Sar Kebat Alun. The rituals related to Jirsong or Jirkedam are **‘Ritnongsingdi’**, **‘Han-Upsor’**, **‘Horlin Kejun’**, **‘Sok Keroy’**, **‘Akakepru’**, **‘Richo Arnam Karkli’**, **‘Jir Ori’** etc.

Hacha Kekan, the festival of the corn deity, is celebrated by the Karbis of the hills while **Domahi** is the spring festival of the Karbis of the plains. **Johang**, a festival of the Karbis of the plains, is celebrated by the villagers collectively at the house of their priest with a view to welcoming benign power and bidding farewell to the evil forces. The worship of rain god with songs and dance is known as **Kurmi worship or Kurmi festival**. The Karbis of the plain also celebrate agriculture related festivals such as **Bither Kitak**, **‘Monuki en’**, **‘Sangkimi Asmar Kepi’**, **‘An-kimi-kecho’** etc.

(c)**Karbi Folk Games and Recreations**: Folk games and recreations are nothing but traditional forms of game practiced by a particular community with regional varieties. Robert A. Georges is of the view that traditional recreations and games are among the most complex forms of expressive behavior that folklorists study.¹⁵ Of all folk games the ‘Hambi-kepathu’ is the prime folk game of the Karbis. It is the game with more than twenty varieties of forms played between two teams with a small wheel hit by a stick.¹⁶ ‘Chobai ke pathu’ is a game generally played by the girls with mollusk shells. ‘Thengtom’ is a game played by the boys at night to see who can throw the ‘Thengtom’ the flaming bamboo torch to the farthest distance. ‘Keng kerek Kechan’ is the game to test who can walk fast while ‘Chekserek-kepathu’ and ‘Jat jat kechan’ are the means of recreations for the girls played with small bamboo sticks and in a palanquin respectively.¹⁷

Karbi folk games and recreations, traditional means to ensure physical and mental growth, have been disseminated from generation to generation by means of participation.

Karbi folk games and recreations can be called the first step of the process socialization in a Karbi folk society through which the younger generations of the community are exposed and expected to assimilate with the local and indigenous human and non-human environment, their own socio-cultural peculiarities and develop oneness with the ways of their folk life. Of course a good number of Karbi traditional games are on the verge of extinct.

(d) Karbi Religion and their modes of Worship: The proposition that Karbi traditional religion is simply a crude form of Hinduism¹⁸ is nothing but reflective of the colonial ideology sustained even in post-independence era. In reality Karbi Religion is a composite one constituted of its own philosophical base, varying beliefs and practices, religious experiences and behavior, deities and demons, priests and sermons etc. Karbi Religion is animistic in nature characterized with its own philosophy expressed in their rituals and purifications, worship of nature and its objects, ancestors' worship, worship of household and territorial deities etc. The Karbis do not believe in the concept of heaven and hell but think that the final destination of the Karbis is their ancestors' land. The narratives of the 'Charhepi' remain the same for all dead persons irrespective of their class or clan or nature. The dirge never refers to hell or heaven but tells that the souls of the dead after celebration of 'Chomangkan' finally go to 'Chom rongme-chom rongso' to be reunited with the souls of their ancestors. The souls are considered immortal and can take rebirth to the corresponding clans. They believe in the concept of unity of all things- earth, man, nature and ancestors' land. Within this unity there is a duality between 'demon' and 'deity' well represented by 'Hi-I' and 'Arnam' respectively, though 'Hi-I' is here not the parallel of the 'Satan' of other religions. The unity and duality of the negative and positive forces and the balance between them are what constitute the philosophical basis of the Karbi folk religion.¹⁹

The deities of the Karbis known as Arnam-atum are innumerable in Karbi society. For example- Arnam Kethe, Peng, Hemphu, Mukrang, Rek-anglong, Arnam Paro, Chomang-ase, Keche-ase, Ajo-ase, So-meme, Theng-thon, Arni, Chiklo, Chajun, Pirtu, Dara, Lumki, Daikhrai, Aawara, Rita Arnam, Murti etc. **Hempfu**, the presiding deity of the households, owns all the Karbi people, the entire community. **Mukrang** is believed to be the creator. **Arnam Kethe** and **Peng** are house-gods, **Rek-anglong** is the deity of the hill and **Arnam paro** is the collective name of hundred deities. The ancestors from both the male and female lineages are also propitiated in 'Chajun'. As far as the female Karbi folk deities are concerned **Rasinja**, **Kase** and **Kabe** are noteworthy. There are a few Karbi folk deities who are given their names from diseases where they preside or which they are asked to avert. Besides every object of nature is believed to be influenced by super natural power and so offerings are made

to fire, water, hillocks, forests, streams etc. It is mention worthy that the Karbis have neither temple or shrines nor images for the deities. Instead of images altars are prepared and in front of the altars bamboo tridents are planted.

Karbi Religion suffers even in post-independent India. Under the strong Assamese ego or Hinduised centre the Karbis with their own religion are compelled to remain in the periphery with suppressed identity. It is a fact that people try to identify the Karbi deities with Hindu gods and read them from the centre. It brings crisis to the identities of the Karbi deities and makes them suffer from colonial ideology. Still most of the Karbis especially of the rural areas follow their indigenous religion and happy to take part in their religious activities.

(e) Indigenous healing system of the Karbis: Karbi indigenous healing system is two dimensional - the first one is herbal folk medicine searching for remedy for every disease in nature and its objects such as herbs, plants etc. while the second one is the magico-religious in which the folk use chants and charms and worship to cure disease. There are about 560 medicinal plants in the Recreation Park, Diphu. Lunse Timung in his book 'Munjin Kangdir' calls this park a great life-saving source. In this work Lunse Timung refers to forty medicinal plants in a Karbi socio-cultural context with picture and ways of cultivation and narrates its nature and medicinal values in terms of different diseases.²⁰ Sikari Tisso refers to 104 plants considered medicinal ones in a Karbi folk society and describes how the Karbis traditionally have been using those plants for curing different diseases exist in their society.²¹ As far as Karbi magico-religious traditional healing system is concerned they worship their household deities like Hemphu, Peng and the deity 'Hi-I' for the well being of their family members ensuring a balance between the good and evil forces of nature. They also celebrate the ritual 'Vo kartap' for curing 'maternal uncle searching disease' of a child. There are a few Karbi folk deities who take their names from diseases where they preside or which they are asked to avert. For example- 'Chomang-ase' is the deity of fever propitiated with a goat, 'Keche-ase' is the deity of rheumatism while 'Ajo-ase' is the deity of cholera. 'Theng-thon' is the deity of recurring sickness and propitiated with a goat or pig or fowls.²²

Waning of popularity of folk medicine among the Karbis in the context of spread of modern education and dissemination of scientific knowledge is a fact. On one hand it implies their shift towards 'rational facts and phenomena'²³ but at the same time it also connotes the present awful situation of bio-diversity and scarcity of healing persons, loss of medicinal plants and charms. Yet Karbi folk medicine has not totally lost its ground. In the rural area it is still popular for its non-toxic quality and low cost. It is not surprising that folk medicine is still the only answer for a poor Karbi living in a remote village suffering from a killing

disease. Karbi folk medicine is not merely a means of curing a patient but a socio-psychological therapy providing health to the entire environment. It is a genre of Karbi folklore nourishing a few genres of their folklore within. Even the most elite Karbi neither can get totally detached from the folk mind within nor can reject the environmental values of the medicinal plants in present day context. They are probably not sure to what extent worship to a household deity or the ritual 'Vo Kartap' can save the life of a Karbi but cannot deny the structural unity that it provides to the family or the community. They may not have today much confidence on the magical power of the healing person but cannot straightway reject the psychological treatment of the patient and the community. Thus the meaning and significance of Karbi folk medicine which cannot be reduced reading it from the desk of modern medical science but lies in own cultural background and its function in its folk society. Plantation and preservation of the medicinal plants will surely contribute to biodiversity and to have a sustainable home.

The social folk custom of the Karbi community is undoubtedly rich and varied. Nothing is fixed for ever in a human situation. In case of Karbi folk custom too celebration has become the life force of the rituals which can be capitalized not merely to achieve the avowed causes of the custom concerned but for socialization, ruralisation, and integration, inculcation of values and for preservation of indigenous environment. In today's environment characterized with dissemination of scientific knowledge and loss of faith in folk way of life, whether the souls of the dead are safely led to the 'ancestors' land' or they are made free to take rebirth to their respective clans or whether the boys and girls after taking part in 'Nimcho-Kerung' are sexually united to ensure new birth to compensate the loss etc., though meaningful at their own context and significant in relative terms, are hardly relevant and no longer remain the prime objectives or functions of 'Chomangkan'. Now the prime significance of their folk custom lies in the fact that these provide opportunity for the individuals to identify and associate themselves with their rites and rituals, folk belief and tradition, art and craft, songs and music and help them to develop oneness with the community and its culture in an ambience of acceptance and conviviality. Similarly their bachelors' dormitory may appear in changing scenario as a skill development centre. The festivals give momentum to social cohesion, integration and community consciousness, cultural assimilation, social mobility, right and identity. These also inculcate folk values in their young generation and lead them to ruralise themselves equipped with modern facilities and scientific knowledge and preserve an eco friendly environment and live a life with their own custom and culture, right and identity, equal growth and development. The varied ways

of their folk life, their racial and linguistic feature, geographical concentration, indigenous socio-political institutions and customary laws, diverse social system and varied culture, own religious philosophy and healing system form the Karbi folk society and reflect peripheral strength of the sociological and folkloristic identity of the greater Assamese community. The community has its strong foot in pan Indian perspective not depending on its incidental Aryan link but capitalizing on its own folkloristic resources.

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