



Traditional games of the Karbi Community of Assam: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract:

Traditional games are the games and movements that are traditional to our cultures and societies. They exist in every society and people used to play those games from generation to generation for centuries. Traditional games imbibe cultural meanings and significance within them in each society. Like any other folklore traditions i.e. songs, dances, tales, folk games are also a part of such folk lore traditions. Traditional games are not just games they were designed in such a way that one can develop lot of skills like logical thinking, building strategies, concentration, basic mathematics, aiming, physical fitness and lot more. Traditional games act as learning aids. Like all other communities and tribes, Karbis has a great tradition of folk games which not only for children but also for the adults too. But due to the advancement of technologies and video games these folk games are in verge of extinction. So, in this paper an attempt will be made to explore different types of traditional games of the Karbis and their procedures. It will try to study its cultural importance to the Karbi society.

Keywords: *traditional/folk games, cultural significance, Karbi, preserve.*

I. Introduction:

Traditional games are the games and movements that are traditional to our cultures and societies. They are in every society and people used to play those games for many generations. Traditional games imbibe very important cultural meanings and significance within them in each society. Traditional games are not just sports. They were designed in such a way that one can develop many skills which are important to our everyday lives like logical thinking, building strategies, concentration, basic mathematics, aiming and lot more. They act as learning aids. They teach us many things like to develop sensory skills, count, add, improve hand eye coordination, physical as well as mental developments, to develop friendships and team spirit and finally to have fun, one play and watch game to have fun. Traditional games neither require expensive tools and equipments to play nor any uniforms or specific accessories. They help people to build life skills and promote teamwork, social interaction and most importantly these traditional games are our heritage and it bridge one generation with another.

UNESCO (1990) recognized traditional games as a part of 'traditional and popular culture...tradition based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by limitation or by other means...

Blanchard K. in his *The anthropology of sport*(1995), defines traditional games as forms of sport activities directly tied to particular local ethnic or folk culture, mostly competitive with physical play and game like elements with limited or no professional variants, with stronger ritual overtones than those so called modern sports. In this respect traditional sports preserved traditional values, developed the skills of participants and help to link the present with the past.

From the time of the Vedic age people in order to pass their leisure time indulged in many amusements especially in games, music and dance. In the Vedic period we can see that people used to play games like chariot racing, horse racing, dicing etc. In every society and community there are many folk games that are played traditionally in traditional way. Many of these games are linked with daily works, religion, celebrations, family life etc. Similarly the people of Karbi community have their own traditional games.

The predominant community in Karbi Anglong is the Karbis, who are apparently of Bodo origin or the Tibeto Burman group of people. The Karbis originally are known as Mikrs. In 1976, the name was replaced by a native term Karbi, means brotherhood. The Karbis are called the "Columbus of North-Eastern Region of India" by Kolaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, famous artist of Assam, for their original autochthones of this region. Karbis are the ethnic tribal group scattered in north east India with concentration in Assam. They mostly inhabited in the districts of Karbi Anglong besides they are also found in Nagaon, Sonitpur, Golaghat, NC Hills and Cachar. Under Section 6 (six) of the Scheduled District Act 1874, the British created the main Karbi dominated areas as 'Mikir Hills Tract' in 1874 A.D. The areas of 'Mikir Hills Tract' was greater than the areas of the present "Karbi Anglong Autonomous District" (earlier known as "Mikir Hills Autonomous District") formed on 23d June 1952, by the Government of Assam. Later on 1st April 1996, the Karbi Anglong District Council was renamed as the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) by an Act of Parliament by incorporating the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (amendment) Act, 1995 to the constitution of India granting greater autonomy to the Council.

The formation of the traditional games is not an accidental affair. It has evolved through many generations in the past. Traditional games are not only a form recreation but represent a community, its values, traditions and cultures. These games are kept on passing through one generation to another. But in this modern age due to coming of mobile gaming, video gaming and other games like cricket, hockey, football, etc possess a threat to the survival of these traditional games so it is a high time to think of measures to preserve these games for our future generations. In this paper a humble attempt will be made to explore the tradition games of the Karbi community and its cultural significance to them.

II. Objective of the Study:

The main objective of this study is

1. To explore and study the types and procedure of the Karbi traditional games.
2. To study the cultural significance of the Karbi traditional games.

III. Methodology:

Both primary and secondary sources are used while doing this research. The primary data is mainly drawn through the medium of interview. Mainly unstructured interview in the form of discussion with knowledgeable person of this field was conducted. Besides, the secondary data is derived from various books, journals and research articles, unpublished dissertation etc. After careful observation of the primary and secondary sources this paper has taken the Historical Method to conduct the research.

IV. Types of Karbi Traditional Games:

The Karbis do not have a strict division of indoor (hem arlo) and outdoor (angtan) games. There are different types of games which were played by children as well as men and women. The names of such games are as follows: - i) **Games mainly played by children** :- a) Armu Kepathu b) Rungtuma Kepathu c) Armu Keroi Kepathu d) Langbi Chitim Achenk Aphan g e) Vo'ak Atar Kacheroi kepathu f) Harmu Kepathu etc.

ii) **Games played by Males**: a) Pholong Kepathu b) Meh Tengtom Langvek c) Ke'kap d) Kengdongdang Ke:dam e) Chir Kejor f) Lobong Kehevan g) Hambi Kepathu (h) Akeng Khong ke'kat i) Nujok Karlu j) Ok'hi Kangplong k) Baptheli Ke'ap l) Thai Ke'ap etc

iii) **Games played by females**: - a) Chupi Kepam b) Therang Kethak c) Tebuk Lang Leng Pen Kekat d) Sekserek Kepathu e) Bang- Kacalhepanlang f) Lankthe Pen Kekat g) Hon Kejeng h) Theng Anghor Pen Kekat etc

V. Games and their procedures:

The procedures of some of the karbi traditional games are described briefly:

i) **Armu Kepathu**(The game of Armu):- From old clothes or from *kher* a ball is prepared. Two groups of players usually play this game. The first team will throw this ball at the other team who will catch the ball. The player who threw the ball will go to the middle and jog at the spot. If they can hit him with the ball while jumping then the jumper is considered out from the game. But if they failed to hit him the player will continue the game.

ii) **Langbi Chitim Achenk Aphan g** (The game of Langbi Chitim Achenk Aphan g):- This is a verbal game. The player will have to recite without breathing langbi chitim achenk aphan g vo:cherok atar ati ipum, langbi chitim achenk aphan g vo:cherok ipum' - In this way the player who recite the lines the highest number is the winner.

iii) **Harmu Kepathu** (The game of harmu): In this game player digg a hole on the earth. At a time only two players can play this game. For one player there will be five holes. In each hole there will be five harmus (small earthen balls). The players, by turn distribute the harmu in each hole. The harmus are picked up from one hole and then distributed in the rest of the holes at the last hole, if there is no harmu left in the hand of the player then the game passes on to the next player. The player gets to collect the harmus of the hole where the last harmu is placed.

iv) **Vo'ak Atar Kacheroi Kepathu**:- Within the boundary of the house the players try to find an appropriate spot then fine slice of bamboo are arranged at a distance of twenty to thirty feet. From there the player will hop a distance of twenty to thirty feet. The player carries each pieces of the bamboo while hopping. The player who carries the highest bamboo pieces is the winner. Many players can play this game.

- v) **Hambi Kepathu**(The game of Hambi):- Earlier times this game was usually played by the royal families. But now a day it seems to be played by all the males of the Karbi community. In this game each player denotes a village. Three players symbolize three villages. Each player will get two hambis. One of the hambi is placed on the ground in a standing position and the other is used while walking. The player who can hit the target by rolling the hambi will initiate the game. But he cannot initiate the game till he hits the hambi placed in the ground. He then spins the hambi keeping the hambi on his feet the player flings it in the air. The player will jump clutching the hambi in between the back knee joint. The player will jump clutching the hambi with his two knees. The player will jump holding the hambi in his waist. Other palyer will take aim from the spot where the hambi stops. The player will go rolling the hambi. Keeping the hambi on the back of the palm will fling it in the air. The hambi roller has to roll the hambi while the eyes are widened by fingers. The player, with closed eyes will take aim to hit. Another player placing it on his back, the player must roll/spin the hambi reaching village/arrival at the turning. It may be varied from place to place.
- vi) **Ke'chon**: This is mainly like the high jump. The jumper who can jump the highest without touching bamboo which is being held in place by two people who volunteers or by any other arrangement gets the first prize.
- vii) **Chor Kejor**:- Chir kejor means throwing the javelin. A bamboo sharpened at one end acts as the javelin. The one who threw the javelin furthest gets the first prize.
- viii) **Kengdongdang Ke;dam**:- Kengdongdang means stilts. It is a race with stilts. The first one who reaches the finishing line gets the first prize.
- ix) **Lobong Kehevan**:- Lobong Kehevan means slashing the banana tree. It is a competition of slashing a number of plantain stems placed serially at one go. The slashing is usually done with a Karbi dao' or a Karbi sword. The one who slashes the maximum stems at one go he will declare as the winner.
- x) **Nujok Karlu**:- It means pole climbing. All the players have to climb a pole usually of bamboo or wooden which is made slippery with oil. Usually the prize is at the top of pole, the one who reaches the top get the prize himself.
- xi) **Bapheli Ke'ap**:- Bapheli Ke'ap means 'to shoot with a sling'. As in any other target shooting game in Bapheli Ke'ap there is predetermined target, the one who hit the bull's eye gets the first prize. The projectile is placed in a cradle made of small woven cloth of *eri* silk thread. The cradle is woven between two strings just off the middle of the strung strings or at a convenient place.
- xii) **Meh Thengtom Langvek**: - This game is basically played on a river. The number of the players was not fixed; it may consist of two or more players at a time. The players should swim from one bank to another bank with one hand and the other hand holding the Mch Tengtom (fire- flame). The player who reaches another part of the bank first wins the game. This game was originated when they prepared themselves for any type of emergency.
- xiii) **Therang Kekat**: - This game is associated with weaving. The cloth should be woven within 24 hours. The number of the players was not fixed. The player who weaves the first with beautiful design is the winner of the game. The cloth is being woven in the handloom.
- xiv) **Chupi Kepam**: - It is a kind of game which is played in river among the females of a Karbi society. They used to catch snail from the river. And at the time of their catching the snail they used to make some sound. The

female who can catch maximum snail and make sound wins the game. Before it was done for fun, but later on it was included in the traditional games of Karbi.

xv) Langthe Pen Kekat:- Lanthe is a Karbi word which is a kind of water reservoir (long bamboo tubes) source in the earlier days that has been used by hilly residing Karbi peoples. It is depicted as a part of traditional sport. The participants have to go river side and fill the long bamboo tubes with water then they have to reach the destination point first will become the winner and receive the honour. In this sport there is no limitation for participation. The tradition of Langthe still continues.

xvi) Sansuri Kachedoi (The game of Sansuri Kachedoi):- This game is played between two groups. Taking a long bamboo/wooden branch, the players at both the end pushes with all their might. The group that cannot return the push is the loser.

xvii) Mekbin Pen Ketheng:- This game has no fixed number of players. One player can play the game at a time. The player is blindfolded, and at a distance place a clay pot is kept. The player who will be able to break the clay pot with blindfolded is the winner of the game.

From when and how these Traditional games of the Karbis are used to be played by the people is not known. The interviewers told us that they learn these games from their grandparents and used to play these games with their friends. A traditional Game is locally organized and has few rules which are not in written form and enforced. Traditional games use very little equipments generally everyday used equipments and simple skills. It helps a player in their physical growth and usually works as a practice session for hunting for men. Traditional games are generally played within localities, villages and sometimes in special occasions between two different communities in a competitive atmosphere. This led to the interaction between communities. As the early life was simple of the Karbi people similarly the games were also simple. The primary objective of these traditional games to provides entertainment as well as physical exercises to keep the mind and body fit. Though the games were played in a competitive way it was not so serious.

Karbhis are hill tribal community of Assam. Though they did jhum cultivation but like any other tribal community they have the habit of collecting food from forest. Women folk usually collect foods like fruits, veggies and men participated in hunting pig or other wild animal and fishing etc. Not only have they collected food items they also collect firewood, bamboos from forest for household works in cooking etc. Likewise, they also need to fetch water from lakes, waterfalls, rivers as in the hills water is not so easily accessible. During the collection of food, water, female folk used to play with each other. Sometimes the female folk while collecting firewood compete with each other whoever can collect fast and will reach home first. In the Lengthe Pen Kekal game, where womenfolk go to the river, waterfalls and fills to fetch water they compete with each other who can reach home or destination point earlier. Thus, some of these everyday works eventually become part of traditional games. Snail is one of the popular delicacies of Assam and Karbi women while go to the river to catch snails they play 'Chupi Kepam'. Another women played game is Therang Kekai which is mainly a weaving game. It is related to hand crafting and creativity. Every community has its own unique style of weaving. In Karbi community also there are gender specific clothing with culturally coded motifs which gave a distinct appearance and meaning. Karbi women are

expert weaver who traces the legacy to 'serdihun' the goddess of weaving. Some games like 'Chir keijor', 'Labong kehevan' can be seen as some practice session before the Male folk go for hunting and to clear forest areas for jhum cultivation.

Preservation of traditional knowledge is very important because it is the preservation of our culture and traditional practices inherited from our past generations from centuries. Folk lore tradition means a community's songs, dance form, tales, and stories etc. Traditional games are also a part of folk tradition. Like any other folk song or dance these games also reflect the whole range of socio cultural pattern of a community. Traditional games reflect the day-to-day life like preparing food items, collecting firewood and other food products from the forest, animal fighting, rites, and rituals of a community. Traditional games do not demand extensive materials and financial investment.

VI. Conclusion:

Karbis are rich in tradition of folk games. These games are not only played by children but adults also enjoyed these games. Still today more or less these games are continued to play by the Karbis despite coming of video games, mobile games etc. Traditional games are those games which came to us from generation to generation through the medium of participation. The younger generations of the community learn these games traditionally from their elder generations.

Due to the advent of modern games such as video games, mobile games, PUBG, cricket; hockey etc traditional games have been under threat of extinction. Today, the situation has changed a lot and it is very rare to see children playing native traditional games. There are very few open areas and playgrounds available and people are gradually shifting to live in cities in nuclear families. On the other hand, traditional games require open grounds and these are generally more hunting oriented. Though, in the rural areas of Karbi Anglong, Karbi community still plays many traditional games. Children spend their evening time in playing these games. These were a means of entertainment as well as physical exercise to them. Though children play these folk games but we observe some changes in them and we can see some touches of modernity in those folk games. The game of "Baptheli Ke'ap" children uses marbles which are easily available in the markets. The game of "Sirim Langlut", "Bang- Kachepanglang" and "Panthai Langvek" has also been discontinued because nowadays people don't go to take bath in the rivers. The game of "Theng Anghor Pen Ke'kat" also disappears due to use of LPG, Kerosene; etc. The game of "Chupi Kepam" has also been changed; it is observed that instead of catching the snail, the female participants had to only make the sound under the water. So this game has been discontinued from the traditional games of the Karbi community.

A good number of Karbi traditional games are on the verge of extinction. Globalization and Westernization have had a negative impact on tradition and local cultural identities. Mobile gaming, video games, commercially produced games and toys possess a great threat to traditional games. Still, Karbi traditional Sports Association (KTSA) which is a new organization of Karbi Anglong had taken measures to preserve Karbi Traditional games and sports floated during a meeting held at KLA office, on 10 May 2019. KTSA resolved and pledge to promote and protect traditional games. They also appeal to all Karbis for support towards their effort in preservation and promotion of traditional games

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