



Certain Plants In The Folklore And Folk: Life Of The Karbis (Mikirs) Of Assam

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ABSTRACT

The Karbis are a hilly tribe of Assam, inhabiting in the mountainous regions. More than 350 plants are related with the folklore and folk life of the Karbis.

Folklore: The role of certain plants like, *Garuga Pinnata*, *Croton jotrfa*, *Lagenaria siceraria* play in their beliefs and customs is discussed.

Folk life: The uses of wild plants as subsidiary food, for shelter and medicine, are discussed, for example, kernel of *Entada phaseoloides*, bark of *Premna latifolia*, base of rachis of *Angiopteris evecta*, etc., as subsidiary food; use of such materials as leaves of *Calamus erectus*, *C. latifolius*, *Daemo-norops jenkinsianus* etc., for thatching, and bark of *Sterculia villosa*, *Trema orientalis* as binding materials in house-build-ing; powder of dry fruits of *Brucea mollis* in malarial fever, leaf-juice of *Clausena excavata* in muscular pain, root decoction of *Ixora acuminata* as galactagogue, etc., as medicines are significant.

In addition, plants used for tattooing, e.g., *Baphicanthus cusia*, *Croton caudatus*, *Lasianthus sikkimensis*, etc. and in worship e.g., *Castanopsis indica*, *Dracaena angustifolia*, *Phlogacanthus thyriflorus*. etc. are also discussed.

Introduction

The Karbis are a semi-nomadic hill tribe of Assam. They inhabit the district of Karbi-Anglong which lies between 25°30' -26°41' N latitude and 92°70'-93.53' E longitude.

The area is largely mountainous; the altitude varies from. 200 m to more than 1,300 m. It has an area of 10,332 sq km.. Approximately 45 per cent of the total area is under forest.

Out of the total population of c. 380 thousand; 55 per cent belongs to different tribal groups. Numerically, next to Karbi, Dimasa Kachari, Lalung, Kuki and Rengma Naga are other major ethnic groups inhabiting the region.

The objective was to study the flora of the region and to evaluate the relationship between the inhabitants and their plant surroundings. It is well known that the uses to which the tribal people put the plants of the area, sometimes give clues to new findings (De, 1968; Jain, 1964, 1972; Schultes, 1960, 1962).. With this view the author undertook a study of the relationships of plants with the life of Karbis of the area.

The methodologies of such studies have been explained by various scholars (Jain 1964, 1967; Reis 1962; Schultes 1960, 1962) who have mentioned the various tools for ethnobotanical research. The methods recognised for this purpose can be divided into two categories: (1) Ethnobotany of the present—through extensive field study among the aboriginals, and (2) Ethnobotany of the past. Glimpses of ethnobotany of the past can be obtained by the study of (a) herbarium and museum materials, (b) old literature, and (c) archaeological remains.

Field work was carried out in several selected habitats Of the Karbis in the district. The areas taken up for study were those where concentration of the Karbis is believed to be above 60 per cent and those habitats are isolated from urban population as far as road communication is concerned. Several weeks. were spent among the local people in each area of study and a close study of uses of the plants as well as their names was, made in the field.

To eliminate any chance of error in identification by mixing of specimens and their uses, the particular specimen, which was the basis of discussion and information from the informant, was brought to the herbarium and identified. These specimens. were dried, poisoned and mounted as per standard method (Jain and Rao, 1976) and deposited as voucher specimens in the-

Central National Herbarium (CAL) in Calcutta and the herbarium at Shillong (ASSAM).

During the stay in field, festivals and other ceremonial occasions, where plants are sometimes used, were attended. Village markets were visited to witness and to record the plant products sold in the market Plate 10, 11 and 12.

Articles of various plant materials, were observed and in many cases brought for the museum. Discussions were held with the local people regarding the legends and songs relating to plants.

A search was also conducted in the Central National Herbarium and the herbarium at Shillong for any uses of the plants recorded on herbarium sheets. The importance and advantage of such a study has already been explained by various scholars Vain 1967, 1972; Reis, 1962; Schultes, 1962, 1960).

Similar search was made for plantlore of the Karbis in literature. Mention may be made in this connection of the fact that very scanty literature exists on this tribe. *The Mikirs*, by Edward Stack (1908) is the only publication dealing exclusively with their ethnology.

FOLKLORE

The influence of plants in religious beliefs and customs becomes obvious through some of their songs and legends.

Tefiii or *Timur* —plant name is mentioned in two songs, *Maurisa-kuhi* and *Karbi-kaplang*. The former is sung in a ritual for the dead, called *Chaumangkan*, which reads:

"Engli karbi lang-ta
Neaumka ki daukak

Lachi pirthe kim *Teihi* araug Acheng bang chijadi alam
Tarata thar-dak athat thar-dak

Whenever a Karbi is asked about the origin of their tribe, he tries to explain it through the song *Karbi-kaplang*: It reads :as follows:

"Nichau mudang-lat marang Karbi-pau ning-phi nang-plang Achang pirdi
thangbi-jang

Timur araug tim ham aklang Karbi laung-chung ang tacham

In both these songs, it is explained that God created human' beings under the *Tejhi* or *Timur* plant. This plant is now identi-- fied as *Garuga pinnata*. They regard this species as sacred and as having some miraculous power.

Rice *chauk* is the staple food of the Karbis. There is a song sung in their harvesting festival *Chaukarauy*, which is as follows::

"Kuki-chin dai-pau pan Teraung Rang Charpau Charnam Cha-pin-ta
Re kathe-rasau kalal chedau lang kula chidau

Hara-chan *Chauk* tipli tarilang Kakan achan chal-nang"

This indicates that an old Karbi, Teraun Rang Charpau by name, came to know from a Kuki-chin fellow, of the existence of wild rice which can be used as food. This man told this to Diliram-Charpau, who collected wild rice and organised a feast and observed the *Chaukarauy* festival for the first time. This. song is known as *Lakhmi-kaplang*.

The song implies on the one hand that the Mikirs were once food-gatherers and on the other that there is some relationship. with the Kuki-chin tribe.

Rice beer is a favourite Karbi local drink. When somebody becomes intoxicated, he sings a song called *Thap-kaplang* which, reads:

"Changcharpau mahin Ei parlim tang-ding Jadi chain pliaur-din
Chum-chi dai ahin

It explains that their God, Changcharpau (whom they regard as the God of creation) taught them how rice-beer cake could be prepared from leaves of a plant called *Marthu*. This plant is now identified as *Croton joufra*. This plant is regarded as sacred and it is believed that the rice-beer prepared with the cake made of this plant has some divine qualities.

The shells of bottle-gourd, *Lagenaria siceraria*, are seen in every ceremony, festival and even day-to-day life. There is a legend regarding the origin of bottle-gourd. It says that once .Changcharpau lost three of his teeth. Fie gave these teeth to his wife to bury. Ultimately one plant sprang out and gave rise to three fruits of characteristic size and shape, viz., *Langbaung*, *Baung-chin* and *Har-baung*. *Langbaung* is used for bringing and storing water. *Baung-chin* is used to offer rice-beer to the Gods and *Harbaung* is used in marriage and other festive occasions.

FOLK LIFE

More than 350 plants are used by the Karbis for their sustenance. The influence of plants in their life can be studied under certain broad general headings, such as food, shelter and medicine, which are their main requirement for life and also plants used for tattooing and worship.

Food

As mentioned above, rice is the staple food of the Karbis. But the method of cultivation is still by *jhuming*. They also cultivate *Zea mays* (*Thang-tha*), *Coix lacryma-jobi* (*Tumdak*), *Pennisetum americanum* (*Jamir*), etc., on a small scale as mixed crops in the *jhum* fields. These food grains can hardly meet their demand for the whole year. Some wild plants, which are quite abundant in this region serve as subsidiary foods in days of scarcity. Except *Dioscorea*, the plants which are mentioned in Table 15.1 are less known for their use as food.

Shelter

As mentioned above, the Karbi people are semi-nomadic in nature. Although nowadays they do tend to settle down, they often still shift their settlements from one place to another. As a rule they construct temporary structures for shelter with the plant materials available in their surroundings.

Characteristic Karbi houses are built on raised platforms, .a peculiar feature of tribal housing in northeastern India. However, now some people build their houses on ground level -also.

The major portion of the house, viz., roof, wall and platform, :is built of bamboos. The most commonly used species are *Banlbusa nutans* (*Clzak*), *B. pallida* (*Chak-duk*), *B. tulda* (*Artunssau*) and *Neohouzeaua dallooa* (*Tarang*). Posts, rafters, pillars of platform, etc., are of such woods, as *Cassia fistula*. (*Haunaru-araung*, *Turmang*), *Dysoxylum binectariferum* (*Khrangkelaung-araung*), *D. dobara* (*Khrang*), *Gmelina arborea* (*Phangaraung*), *Melia azedarach* (*Hanthapi*), *Mesua ferrea* (*Phik-char.ne-araung*), etc.

The thatching materials generally used are the leaves of *Livistona jenkinsiana* (*Taukau-araung*) and *Imperata cylindrica* (*Phalang*). Occasionally leaves of *Calamus erectus* (*Pre* or *Tor*, a name applied to all canes), *C. latifolius*, *Daemonorops jenkin.siatzus* and *Phrynium pubinerve* (*Kau-arbau*) are also used.

The barks of *Sterculia villosa* (*Kaung-kelau*) and *Trema orientails* are used as binding materials.

Medicine

The knowledge of medicinal uses of plants is well-developed among the Karbis. More than two hundred fifty plants are used by them for medicinal purposes. But the knowledge is confined chiefly to the medicinemen. However, a good number of these plants are also used in the Karbi household when the local medicineman is not available. Table 15.2 lists a number of plants employed in common ailments. These plants grow mostly near the villages and do not necessitate any complicated technique when the need arises for applying them.

Tattooing

Tattooing of any part of the body is not popular either with men or women. Nevertheless, some women on attaining puberty are found to wear a tattoo mark in form of a perpendicular line on the forehead, nose, upper lip and chin (Plate 13). This is done with the leaf-juice of *Baphicanthus cusia* (*Bukangda, Bukangku,*

Table:1 Some common species used for eating

<i>Botanical name</i>	<i>Local name</i>	<i>Edible part/how prepared</i>
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Act ephila excelsa

Alpinia rnalaccensis Amorphophallus campanulatus

Angiopteris evecta (Plate 15)

Ant idestna diandrum

Begonia roxburghii

Calams tenuis

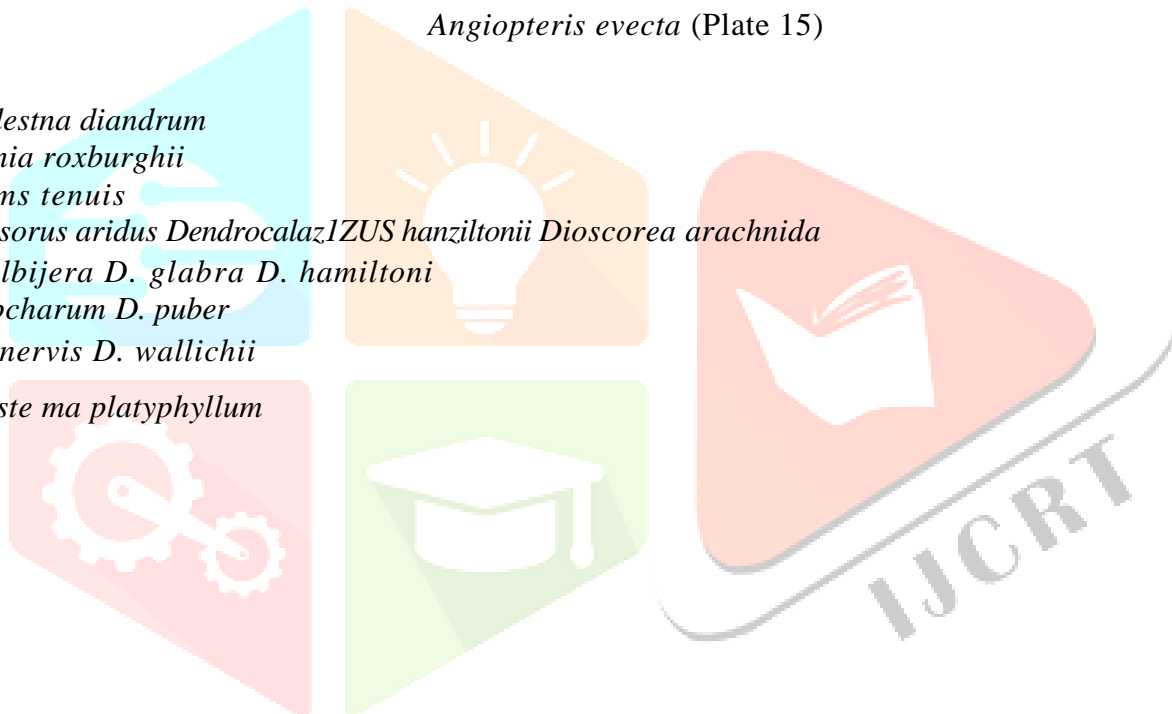
Cyclosorus aridus DendrocalazIZUS hanziltonii Dioscorea arachnida

D. bulbijera D. glabra D. hamiltoni

D. lepcharum D. puber

D. trinervis D. wallichii

Elatoste ma platyphyllum



Mipri

Tara Thatnanai

Chainatt-aukint

Inchung Chuat

Pre or Taur Dung-kak Kaiphau Rui-sang Rui-pan Rui-ding Rui-kaulang Rui-ning Rui-hay: Rui-han-dang Rui-nihang

Tang-nap

Leaves eaten as vegetable;
 seeds eaten fried
 Young shoots eaten roasted
 Tubers eaten roasted or boiled; leaves as vegetable
 Underground parts and base of rachis eaten after boiling and thorough washing
 Young leaves eaten as vegetable Leaves and petioles eaten as vegetable Young shoots eaten roasted
 Young leaves eaten as vegetable Young shoots eaten after boiling Tubers eaten boiled
 Tubers and bulbils eaten boiled Eaten boiled
 Eaten boiled
 Eaten boiled
 Eaten boiled
 Tubers eaten boiled
 Tubers eaten after boiling and thorough washing
 leaves eaten as vegetable

Entada

phaseoloides

Hamb-arikang

Ficus hirta

Inghthum-therapau
 cooked

Gnetum gnemon

Hanthu
 fried.

Lasig spinosa

Chuchat
 thorough washing

Maesa indica

Naukling

Pouzolzia

Utkra

viminosa

Kernel eaten after boiling and
 thorough washing
 Young leaves and young fruits eaten
 Leaves eaten roasted: fruits eaten
 Rhizome eaten after boiling and
 Shoots eaten as vegetable
 Leaves and shoots eaten as vegetable

Table:2 Some common species used in medicine

Botanical name	Local name	Parts used and preparation	Disease and method of administration
<i>Aristolochia saccata</i>	Rikangbatelaung	Underground part	Given in stomach
<i>Baccaurea sanida</i>	Tamnaiuk	Fresh bark chewed or	Constipation—oral
<i>Brucea moths</i>	Kaunine	Powder of dry fruits	Malarial fever—oral
<i>Clausena excapata</i>	Thaungkuk	Juice of leaves	Muscular pain—rub-
<i>Clerodendrum</i>	Hinchang	Young leaves used	Act as anthelmintic -
<i>Colubocidium</i>		as vegetable	
<i>Coffea henohalensis</i>	Mirherai	Leaves infusion	Infants with fever —bath
<i>Dalhousiea bracteata</i>	Laungv-aurethu	Leaves pounded into paste	Cuts—applied
<i>Dracaena augustifolia</i>	Charlano	Poultice of young leaves	Swelling of joints —annlied
<i>Dracaena petiolata</i>	Laungla	Juice of roots	Stomach pain and
<i>Elatostema lineolatum</i>	Himbu	Leaves pounded into paste	Cuts—applied
<i>Eunhorbia antiaurum</i>	Hiiu-araung	Latex	Burns—applied
<i>Iledvotis scandens</i>	Hanik-tu	Poultice of leaves	Boils—annlied
<i>Homalomena aromatics</i>	Aukha-tachang	Rhizome	Influenza—inhalation
<i>Hova globulosa</i>	Mitha-nadai	Leaf-ash	Dog bite—annlied

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<i>Hyptianthera stricta</i>	<i>Mirherai</i>	Infusion or powder of dry leaves	Expectant mother—oral
<i>Ixora acuminata</i>	<i>Launga-pranpi-thecka</i>	Decoction of roots	Used as galactagogue

<i>Botanical name</i>	<i>Local name</i>	<i>Parts used and preparation</i>	<i>Disease and method of administration</i>
<i>Aristolochia saccata</i>	<i>Rikangbatelaung</i>	Underground part pounded and mixed with water	Given in stomach pain—oral
<i>Baccaurea sapida</i>	<i>Tampaiuk</i>	Fresh bark chewed or juice	Constipation—oral
<i>Brucea moths</i>	<i>Kaunine</i>	Powder of dry fruits	Malarial fever—oral
<i>Clausena excapata</i>	<i>Thaungkuk</i>	Juice of leaves	Muscular pain—rubbed on
<i>Clerodendrum colebrookianum</i>	<i>Hinchang</i>	Young leaves used as vegetables	Act as anthelmintic -
<i>Coffea benghalensis</i>	<i>Mirherai</i>	Leaves infusion	Infants with fever—bath
<i>Dalhousiea bracteata</i>	<i>Laungy-aurgthu</i>	Leaves pounded into paste	Cuts—applied
<i>Dracaena augustifolia</i>	<i>Charlang</i>	Poultice of young leaves	Swelling of joints—applied
<i>Dracaena petiolata</i>	<i>Laungla</i>	Juice of roots	Stomach pain and vomiting—oral
<i>Elatostema lineolatum</i>	<i>Himbu</i>	Leaves pounded into paste	Cuts—applied
<i>Euphorbia antiquorum</i>	<i>Hiju-araung</i>	Latex	Burns—applied
<i>Iledyotis scandens</i>	<i>Hanik-tu</i>	Poultice of leaves	Boils—applied
<i>Homalomena aromatics</i>	<i>Aukha-tachang</i>	Rhizome	Influenza—inhalation
<i>Hoya globulosa</i>	<i>Mitha-nadai</i>	Leaf-ash	Dog bite—applied
<i>Hyptianthera stricta</i>	<i>Mirherai</i>	Infusion or powder of dry leaves	Expectant mother—oral
<i>Ixora acuminata</i>	<i>Launga-pranpi-thecka</i>	Decoction of roots	Used as galactagogue