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The Clan(Kur) And Sub-Clan System Of The Karbi Tribe In Northeast India: Structure, Function, And Cultural Significance

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Abstract:

The Karbi tribe of Northeast India represents a unique socio-cultural system rooted in an intricate clan and sub-clan organization. These paper explores the structural composition, social function, and cultural implications of the Karbi clan and sub-clan system, specifically within the institution of marriage , governance, and traditional beliefs. It attempts to explore the enduring relevance of these indigenous institutions in maintaining identity and social cohesion amid modern influences.

Keywords: Karbi, tribe, clan system, sub-clan, Kur, kur-so, exogamy, Northeast India, indigenous ,etc.

Introduction:

The Karbi community, constitutionally referred to as the “Mikir” in the Government of India’s Scheduled Tribes Order, constitutes one of the major indigenous ethnic groups of Northeast India. They mainly resided in the hills and plian areas of Assam. The Karbi people represent the principal indigenous community of the Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts in the state of Assam. The Karbi people are likewise present in the plains of Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj, and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Racially, the Karbis are generally classified within the Mongoloid ethnolinguistic group. Linguistically, the Karbi language, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, is spoken by the majority of the community, serving as a key marker of their ethnic and cultural cohesion. The Karbis have traditionally adhered to animistic beliefs and identify their indigenous faith as “Honghari.” They worship Hemphu and Mukrang as their principal deities, who are revered as the creators of the universe in Karbi belief. Traditional animal sacrifices, prayers, and festivals are performed to appease the gods and spirits, ensuring good health, prosperity, and a good harvest. There are multiple scholarly perspectives regarding their migration and settlement patterns, with some researchers tracing their origins to Austro-Asiatic or broader Mongoloid populations. Karbi society is patrilineal, children inherit their father’s clan and surname, and inheritance for property often passes through son. The community is organized into distinct clans, each characterized by its unique customs, traditions, and ancestral heritage. The Karbi settlement structure is village-based, wherein each village is governed by a headman—referred to as the ‘Rong-eh-sar’, ‘Sarthe’, or ‘Gaonbura’—appointed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. According to their territorial distribution, the Karbis are classified into three major groups: Chingthong, Ronghang, and Amri. These groups are popularly known as Chinthong, Nilip-Ronghang, and Amri Marlong, respectively. The precise origins of the Karbi people remain insufficiently documented; however, historical and anthropological

accounts suggest that they constitute one of the earliest indigenous populations to have inhabited the region now known as Assam. Historically, the Karbi people resided in small, dispersed villages and primarily engaged in *Inglong Arit* or *Jhum* (shifting) cultivation as their traditional mode of subsistence. Their social organization was clan-based, accompanied by a distinct indigenous administrative structure in which governance was exercised by village elders. The Karbi community possesses a rich and distinctive tradition of handicraft, most prominently reflected in their hand-woven textiles. These textiles are celebrated for their intricate geometric patterns, vibrant chromatic schemes, and the sophisticated weaving techniques employed in their creation. Traditional garments such as the *Pini* (women's lower garment), *Pekok* (shoulder cloth), and *poho* (men's wrap) serve not only utilitarian functions but also embody cultural symbolism, social identity, and aesthetic values within Karbi society. Weaving is predominantly undertaken by women, underscoring their pivotal role in safeguarding and transmitting indigenous knowledge and artistic heritage across generations. Furthermore, textile production remains intrinsic to ceremonial practices, social representation, and the maintenance of cultural continuity among the Karbis.. They also create intricate bamboo and wooden crafts, which are used in daily life or for ceremonial purposes.

Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) is a key political body in the region, which works to preserve the rights and identity of the Karbi people. The Karbi have also been active in social and political movements, seeking greater autonomy and recognition for their culture and land rights.

OBJECTIVE: The primary objective of this paper is to explore the intricate social structure of the Karbi tribes, specifically focusing on the clan and sub-clan system that forms the backbone of their community organization. This study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To analyse the Clan and sub-clan of the karbi tribes:
2. To analyse the Social and Cultural Significance of Clans and Sub-Clans:
3. To analyse the role of clan and sub-clan in the marriage pattern.
4. To Contribute to the Preservation of Karbi Cultural Identity.

By fulfilling these objectives, the study aims to enhance the scholarly understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of the Karbi community, offering critical insights into the pivotal role of clan and sub-clan structures in shaping their social organization, cultural practices, and collective identity.

RESERCH METHODOLOY: This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the clan and sub-clan system of the Karbi community and its role in shaping their socio-cultural life. The methodology incorporates both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matters. Primary information was obtained through direct engagement with community members by means of interviews, informal conversations, oral narratives, and participatory discussions. Secondary data were sourced from relevant academic and documentary materials, including books, research papers, journals, magazines, newspapers, souvenirs, published theses, and authenticated online resources that focus on the socio-cultural life and folk traditions of the Karbi. To strengthen the reliability and credibility of the collected information, the researcher also conducted field observations, enabling a contextual understanding of Karbi cultural practices and social organisation.

DISCUSSION:

CLAN SYSTEM (KUR): The clan system constitutes a central feature of the socio-cultural and political organisation of the Karbi community. It represents the primary framework through which social relations are structured and regulated. The significance of the clan extends to various dimensions of community life, including marital alliances, ritual practices, and the construction of collective cultural identity. The Karbis adhere to a patrilineal system of descent, wherein lineage, inheritance, and clan membership are transmitted through the male line, reinforcing the authority and continuity of the paternal kin group. Clan is the core unit of social organization in Karbi society. Each Karbi individual is born into a specific clan, which determines their social identity . Clans act as a social network that provides a sense of belonging and solidarity. The identity of a person is closely tied to their clan, and it is through the clan that individuals trace their ancestry

and familial lineage. Both males and females use their clans name as a patronym in official documents, resulting in a limited variety of such names. A gender-specific suffix (Pi) is added to patronyms when referring to women. A notable cultural practice among the Karbi is that daughters retain their clans name even after marriage. A married woman continues to carry her father's patronym. Nevertheless, the lineage traced through the male line does not continue through women, since offspring are identified with the clan of their father instead of that of their mother.

The clan system holds significant importance in regulating marriage practices among the Karbi community. As Karbi society follows an exogamous clan structure, individuals are required to marry outside their own clan to maintain social order and prevent relationships that are deemed incestuous. Members belonging to the same clan are regarded as siblings, and therefore marital unions within the same clan are strictly prohibited. Any breach of this customary norm may result in social sanctions, including fines, ostracism, or complete exclusion from the community. A distinctive cultural practice is the addition of the suffix “pi” to the surnames of women, which allows for clear gender identification within the naming system. For example, if the male title or surname is ‘Timung’, then the female surname will be ‘Timungpi’. Even after marriage neither the bride nor the groom changes their surname. The children of the couple would inherit the surname of their father. The clan system is central to efforts in preserving Karbi identity and resisting assimilation or dilution of traditions.

Structure of the Clan (Kur) and Sub-Clan (Kurso) System:

Major Clan (Kur): The Karbi society is divided into five major clans, known as ‘Kur’. The five primary clans or ‘kur’. These are 1) Lijang or Engti, 2) Hanjang or Terang, 3) Ejang or Enghi, 4) Kronjang or Teron and 5) Tungjang or Timung.

Sub-Clans (Kur-so): Each of the five major clans is further divided into many sub-clans (‘kur-so’ or ‘small kur’), which may also sometimes function as lineages or patrilineages. So let discuss in detail:

a) Lijang or Engti: The Lijang or engti have six sub-clans, they are Engti Hansek ,Engti kathar bura ,Kathar Riso ,Engleng ,Taro and Engti killing etc

b) Hanjang or Terang : The Hanjang or Terang have fifteen sub-clans, they are Terang ,Terang Engnar,Terang Ingjai,Terang Dilli,Terang Rongcheicho,Bey Ke-ik,Bey Ke-et ,Bey chingthong ,Bey Dum,Bey lindok ,Bey miji, Kro,Kro nilip, Kro nihang ,Kro khamu etc.

c) Kronjang or Teron: The kronjang or Teron have nine sub-clans, they are Teron Milik,Teron kongkat,Teron langne,Sirang,Dengja, Ai,Torap,Sir-ik,Miji etc

d) Ejang (Enghi / Inghi) : The enghi have thirty sub-clan ,they are Enghi,Rongpi , Rongpi Ronghang, Rongpi Amri ,. Rongpi Chingthong, Rongpi Lindok ,Rongpi Meji , Rongpi Rongchehon,Ronghi, Ke-ap, Rengoi, Renglum, Rente,Lekthe,Bongrung, Kramsa , Hanse Lindok,Hanse Chingthong, Hanse Durong, Hanse Nongphili, Hanse Nongloda, Hanse Ka’I (Kalongtam),Ronghang, Ronghang Lindok , Tisso Rongphu, Tisso Rongchitim , Tisso Rongling, Tisso Motho , Tisso Rongcheicho ,Tisso etc.

e) Tungjang (Timung): The Tungjang or Timung clan also have thirty sub-clans, they are :Timung, Timung Rongpi , Timung Killing ,Timung Phura ,Phangcho , Phangcho Juiti , Phangcho Langteroi, Phangcho Ingmar , Phangcho Vojaru, Pator ,Killing Miji, Killing Nokbare, Senar, Senar Muchiki ,Senar Meji, Tokbi Ronghang, Tokbi Totiki , Tokbi Chingthong, Tokbi Dera ,Rongphar Senot , Rongphar Phura , Nokbare (Longthulu), Nongdu , Nonglada , Dera , Senar Pator , Senot ,Chalut Senot, Mu Chophi ,Tokbi Killing.

Role of clan(Kur) and sub-clan(Kur-so) in marriage:

The clan system serves as a foundational element of the Karbi social organization, shaping both their societal hierarchy and their traditional patterns of marriage. The Karbi tribe, primarily inhabiting the Karbi Anglong district of Assam in northeastern India, maintains a distinct clan and sub-clan structure that significantly influences their social organization, cultural traditions, marital regulations, and collective identity. Karbi people follow a strict rule of exogamy, meaning marriages are typically arranged between individuals from different clans. This system encourages the formation of alliances between different clans and helps maintain social cohesion. Many Karbi clans and sub-clans are associated with specific totems or ancestral myths. Clan often had distinct practices during festivals like Chomangkan (death ceremony), which is crucial for spiritual rites and community bonding. Clans in karbi are exogamous, so Karbis people prefer a cross-cousin marriage consisting for a man to marry his mother's brother's(ong) daughter (ong-asopi or korpi). Women are encouraged to marry her father's sister (Ni) son (Tepo). According to Karbi customary norms, individuals belonging to the same clan are regarded as siblings, irrespective of their direct biological relationship. From generation this kind of cross-cousin marriage is encouraged in karbi communities. And any violation to this customary law leads to ex-communication of the marriage couple from the karbi society and has to encounter severe punishment like expel from the village. Before, the marriage, elder of the both clans negotiate, ensuring the union is socially accepted.

In olden generation, there was a practice of child marriage but now in modern era this kind of practice is rarely seen. There is another interesting practice in karbi tribes that is called 'Piso-kemen', where the groom will stay in his mother's brother's house (ong hem) before courtship with his ong-sopi or korpi. The family members of the groom will give a proposal to a bride family and if the bride father agree these alliances, then the groom will stay in a bride house for one or two years before their courtship.

In a traditional marriage ceremony of the karbis, there are various stages to complete the ceremony such as first stage-Nengpi- Nengso -kachingki (conversation between bride mother and groom mother), second stage -Piso- kehang (formal wife seeking ceremony), third stage-kapatini(confirmation of the marriage) , fourth stage - Ajo- Arni kepha(fixing of date of the marriage) , fifth stage-Adam kanthur or Adam -Asar (solemnisation of marriage) and the last final stage - Peso- Riso kethon (returning of bride clothes to paternal home).

Why the Clan (kur) System Matters in karbi Tribes -Putting together the structural, functional and cultural perspectives, we can articulate why the clan (kur) and sub-clan (kur-so) system matters for the Karbi tribe in multiple dimensions.

- ❖ **Social Cohesion & Integration:** The clan system binds individuals into a network of kinship relations, alliances, obligations and shared identity. It integrates the dispersed tribal population across villages, hills and plains.
- ❖ **Identity & Belonging:** Membership in a clan gives a person a place, a name, a heritage. The clan surname functions not merely as a cultural tradition, but as a significant indicator of one's ancestral lineage and affiliation with the Karbi community.
- ❖ **Regulation & Social Order:** The rules of exogamy, descent, inheritance, marriage and ritual embedded in the clan system provide ordered structure, limiting ambiguity and maintaining social balance.
- ❖ **Cultural Continuity & Resilience:** In the face of modernisation, the clan system provides continuity with the past. It preserves lineage memory, ritual frameworks, and a sense of tradition.
- ❖ **Symbolic & Mythical Significance:** Through myths of origin, epic narratives, ritual roles, the clan system is invested with symbolic meaning: of descent from a common ancestor, of sacred lineage, of non-marriageable kin as siblings, of communal belonging under the "Jambili -Athon" rod of the five clans.

Therefore, the clan system is not an archaic relic but a living institution, embedded in everyday life, identity, ritual, and social regulation.

Cultural Significance and Symbolic Dimensions: Beyond its structural and functional aspects, the clan system carries rich cultural and symbolic meanings for the Karbi people.

- **Symbol of Tribal Unity and Identity:** At the tribal level, the clan system unifies an otherwise dispersed population (across hills and plains, various localities) into a coherent society. By identifying with one of the five major clans, individuals link to a wider collective and to shared origins. The oral epic *Mosera Kihir* (often titled “Muchera-Kehir”) recounts ancestral journeys and group origins under the symbolic “Jambili Athan” rod, which itself has five branches corresponding to the five clans. The use of clan names as surnames, coupled with the practice of women retaining their father’s clan name after marriage, demonstrates the profound integration of clan affiliation into individual identity within Karbi society. The survival of the clan structure is a marker of Karbi distinctiveness in the broader Assamese and Indian context.
- **Ritual and Mythic Foundations:** The clan system is often tied into mythic-historical narratives. The notion of common ancestry, descent from a common forebear, and sub-clan divisions that trace back to that ancestor imbues the system with sacred significance. The prohibition against intra-clan marriage is rooted not only in social custom but also in mythological belief, as individuals belonging to the same clan are traditionally regarded as siblings. Therefore, the clan system is more than pragmatic—it expresses a worldview: of descent, of kinship, of taboo, of connectedness to ancestors and to the land. It also connects to rituals: festivals, mortuary practices, clan-specific roles, etc.
- **Social Order and Moral Regulation:** By placing boundaries around marriage and descent, the clan system regulates social behaviour and ensures order. The exogamy rule helps maintain alliances rather than endogamy; inheritance rules maintain family lines; ritual roles maintain communal balance. Violations of clan norms (e.g., marrying within the same clan) may lead to severe sanctions including excommunication. This regulatory function situates the clan system as a key institution of moral authority, social order, and cultural preservation within Karbi society. Elders and community members collectively ensure compliance with established customs, viewing any breach of these norms as a serious disruption to the ethical and social fabric of the group.
- **Adaptation and Cultural Resilience:** The fact that the Kur-system continues to matter even as Karbi society engages with schooling, Christianity, Hinduisation, state governance, and migration speaks to its cultural resilience. In times of change, maintaining clan identity offers continuity, anchors value systems, and helps root the individual within a tradition. Research shows that even in villages that have embraced a reform religion (e.g., Lokhimon), the rule of clan exogamy remains in place.

Thus, the clan system becomes a cultural fortress: not rigidly fossilised, but dynamic enough to adapt while preserving core identity functions.

Challenges, Tensions and Contemporary Issues: No social system remains unaffected by external pressures, and the Karbi clan system is no exception. Several contemporary issues are worth noting.

- ❖ **Urbanisation, Migration and Conversion:** As Karbi people move to towns, engage with non-tribal populations, take up education and new livelihoods, the tightness of clan-based social regulation may loosen. The shifting dynamics of contemporary life may contribute to the emergence of novel forms of identity and marital arrangements.. Conversion to Christianity or other religions may also disrupt traditional ritual linkages, though clan identity often persists.
- ❖ **Changing Norms of Marriage and Kinship:** Although traditional norms continue to exert considerable influence, signs of social transformation are increasingly evident. Shifts in marital preferences—particularly the growing acceptance of love marriages over arranged unions—along with evolving gender roles and exposure to external cultural influences, are beginning to challenge the rigid enforcement of exogamous marriage and sub-clan regulations. Some young people may marry outside the clan system

altogether or may ignore sub-clan taboos. The interplay of modern laws (on marriage, inheritance) and customary rules may cause tension.

- ❖ **Legal and Administrative Impacts:** The Karbi territories fall under the Sixth Schedule of India's Constitution (for tribal areas). The clan system interacts with formal governance (Autonomous Council, village councils). The recognition of customary laws, land rights, inheritance rights, and clan jurisdictions sometimes intersects with state law. The maintenance of clan-based boundaries (for land, inheritance, social regulation) may face legal questions, especially under modern statutory frameworks.
- ❖ **Internal Stratification and Identity Politics:** Although the five major clans are officially of equal status, in earlier times the Ingti (Lijang) clan had a priestly status, giving it symbolic elevation. Today, questions of prestige, identity, and representation may still reflect clan affiliations. As tribal communities engage with politics, representation, resource access, clan identity may become leveraged or contested.
- ❖ **Preservation of Oral and Ritual Knowledge:** The clan system is embedded in oral traditions (lineage stories, epic narratives like *Mosera - Kihir*), ritual practices, and local customary law. With declining traditional knowledge, younger generations moving to cities, and external cultural influences, the continuity of this knowledge may be threatened. Research indicates that certain ritual practices are being abandoned or simplified.

Conclusion: The clan (*Kur*) and sub-clan (*Kurso*) system among the Karbis represents a sophisticated indigenous social structure that governs kinship, marriage, and cultural life. It ensures social harmony, regulates moral conduct, and preserves a unique sense of ethnic identity. Despite modernization, the clan system continues to serve as a cornerstone of Karbi cultural integrity and communal solidarity. The clan (*kur*) and sub-clan (*kur-so*) system of the Karbi tribe is a richly layered institution: structurally organised, functionally integral, culturally meaningful. With five major patrilineal clans each subdivided into numerous sub-clans, regulated by rules of descent, naming, inheritance and marriage, the system shapes the fabric of Karbi society. It establishes the parameters of marital alliances, dictates the transmission of property and lineage, structures participation within ritual spaces, and plays a central role in defining and perpetuating collective identity. It remains a source of tribal unity, cultural resilience, moral order and personal belonging. While contemporary change—migration, education, religious conversion, legal modernisation—poses challenges, the endurance of the clan system in many Karbi villages demonstrates its vitality. For the Karbis, to know one's clan is to know one's roots; to live within the rules of one's clan is to live within a shared world of meaning and community. In sum, the *Kur/Kur-so* system is far more than a genealogical category—it is the backbone of Karbi social architecture, the web of kinship that sustains culture, identity and tradition. Understanding this system is essential to any meaningful comprehension of Karbi society.

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