



# Changing aspects in Karbi Culture, Folklore and Literature

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to bring to light the changing dimensions in Karbi culture, Folklore and Literature taking references from various instances drawn from the changes observed in Karbi society consequential to “modernism” or “globalism”, and the advent of Christianity and the impacts of the Gospel upon the community as a whole. Herein, I would like to present the various Karbi rites and rituals associated with the Karbi religious festivals, occasions and other culture related instances that have been replaced with new form of rites and rituals due to the acceptance of a new religion i.e. Christianity and how, it has led to the diminishing of this traditional culture in their community lives. However, it is to be mentioned that, changes in the Karbi traditional society have taken place not only because of the acceptance of Christianity. New forms of worship in the Karbi society namely, “Aron Kimi”, “Hemphu Lokhimon” are also accountable for the changing culture of the Karbi traditional society. The emphasis of this paper is on some selected few dimensions with regard to the study topic namely, the effects that the acceptance of a new religion, i.e. Christianity had on the people’s religious life, socio-economic life, social customs and culture, education and literature. This paper will also throw light on the real crisis faced by animist Karbis when it comes to declaring their legal status of their religion. The varied changing dimensions in the traditional culture of the Karbis like the change in the culinary practices, dress patterns, language will also be discussed here.

**Introduction:** The Karbis, mentioned as the Mikir in the Constitution Order of the Government of India, are one of the major indigenous ethnic tribe in Northeast India and especially in the hill areas of Assam. The Karbis are scattered here and there but the majority of the Karbis live in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, now known as Dima Hasao. Besides Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, Karbis are also found in other districts like Nagaon, Kamrup, Golaghat, Jorhat and states like Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur and countries like Bangladesh.

There are different opinions about the term “Karbi”. According to Basa Kathar, the term Karbi means ‘elder.’ The tradition says that, Karbi is the eldest among the twelve brothers who came from Burma (Myanmar) ahead of the other brothers. Whatever may be the origin of the term ‘Karbi’, it is present in the legendary songs of these people. Formerly, the Karbis were known as Mikir. Its origin is not known. Some say that it was given by the American missionaries, while others say it was given to the race by the Assamese. They call themselves as Arleng, which means ‘man’ in general. According to Lyall, the term ‘Arleng’ properly means a Mikir man, not a man in general,

who would be 'monit'. Besides, according to him, the etymological significance came from the fact that their forefathers generally used to dwell on the hill slopes and thus, they were known as Arleng or hill dwellers or hillmen.

The Karbis are originally animists but, in the present scenario, we see the existence of other religions like Christianity, Bhaktim, Buddhist etc. The animist Karbis do not worship idols nor do they have organised system of worship on a temple. They offer sacrifices like eggs, chicken, goat, pig etc. for prosperity, good health and success. They have traditionally been the worshippers of 'Hemphu Mukrang'. There is no Karbi equivalent to exactly describe the term – 'religion'. A Sanskrit derivative 'dhorom' is used to convey the sense of a religion in the modern day Karbi vocabulary. Correspondingly, as cited in "Karbi Studies Vol-2, by Dharamsing Teron, an animist Karbi is faced with a real crisis when he is required to give a mandatory declaration of his 'religion' in an official or legal document, say for instance, filling up a census data. Such a situation grips him with the sense of imminent loss of identity as he is forced to submit it to the dominant culture. Reinforcing his fears and reminding him of the stark reality, the '2001 Census of India' has, not surprisingly, recorded a sweeping 84.64 % of the Karbis as Hindus. If the figure is taken to be true, the situation for many animist Karbis become all the more vulnerable, as the vast majority of them are not 'Hindus' for the simple reason that, since the days of their forefathers, 'Peng', 'Hemphu Mukrang', Hi-I, the dozens of 'territorial deities', and the 'ancestor spirits'(tirim) have continued to play a crucial role in the animist Karbi pantheon. Therefore, it is observed that, traditional faith of the Karbis i.e, animistic form of worship' is in real danger if further steps are not taken in order to gain its legal status in legal documents. As a result, many Karbis conceive of themselves to be followers of 'Hinduism' confusing themselves with the status of their original faith because of the imposition imposed on them by the legal documents that says they are Hindus. The situation of a traditional Karbi is now, in danger as he fails to find categorisation of his religion in the legal documents.

In traditional Karbi society, every occasion is a ritual and every ritual is an occasion. There are as many incantations or hymns as there are rituals. Ritual incantations cover almost the entire life-cycle of a Karbi. Karbis are basically ancestor worshippers who perform various life-preserving rituals at regular intervals. From cradle to the grave, a Karbi life is governed by myriad ritual observances invariably accompanied by incantations. Ritual from a child's birth, through the cycles of infancy to various stages of adulthood till his death, a Karbi life goes through various 'rites of passage'. For instance, the creation story of the Karbis like the Hemphu Keplang(Origin of Hemphu), Karbi Keplang(Origin of Karbi), Nihu Keplang( Origin of Maternal uncle) , 'Rongkim' or the origin of the village etc. give us the idea to understand the Karbi people i.e the ways of life and culture of the people.

### **The concept of Good and Evil- The presence of God(Arnam) and Evil(Hi-i)**

The concept of good and evil is highly vibrant in the Karbi society, and is based on the religious practices of the people. Common belief is, 'good' refers to God(Arnam) and evil refers to devil or demon(Hi-i) and considers both entities as possessing divinity and unseen power and enjoying equal status.

While Arnam are sympathetic and helpful to Karbis and human in general, hi-i inflicts harm or sorrow without any provocation. Hi-i literally means devil or demon or any destructive entities or forces that cause harm to mankind. The underlying difference however, is that Arnam are assigned with specific duties towards Karbis, and their propitiations are meant for strengthening the bond of association. While hi-i has no such obligations and their propitiation is temporary, i.e, only to appease hi-i not to harm Karbis. In many families, however, hi-i are propitiated as 'hem angtar'(Household God). As for instance, the God Peng(the protector) who is actually a 'Chek Kama', a 'hi-i', is propitiated by sacrificing fowls and one white male goat. The concept of good and evil is also extended to persons or objects that possess divinity or unnatural power. Many plants and animals are considered as symbols of hi-i, which is of course, based on legends. 'Chiri'(Ficus spp., Moraceae), thengmu(Alstonia scholars R.Br. Apocynaceae) among plants, and vo-ak(Crow), takun (vultures) appease –pacify some by agreeing to their demands, among animals are considered as symbols of hi-i, and so, are often avoided. There are still many popular Karbi folklores based on Arnam and hi-i that are still narrated to children as bed-time stories. However, it is a grave concern that, with modernism, the Karbi society in the present context is marching towards a situation of "loss of cultural identity " as we see that, the Karbis of the present generation have not done much to keep these folktales alive.

**Teri-Terot Alun:** The 'Teri-Terot Alun' is a verse that is ritually recited to mark the "cutting of the new born child's umbilical cord" and is associated with the rite of child birth. In the present context, the Teri-Terot Alun is slowly losing its importance in the Karbi society with the rise of modernism. Another rite called "Klongklo a-Thekar," a process of post-birth purification, performed by members of each clan that also marks their formal acceptance into the tribe is also losing its significance in the Karbi society. Any clan member who has not performed this process is considered an outsider. Thus, the purification rites and rite of child birth identifies the new born child as a 'Karbi' and considers him as an inborn member of the Karbi community. However, for a Christian Karbi, the case is different as these rites are not performed in a Christian Karbi family. The Christian Karbi families welcome the new born child with Christian prayers. However, it is to be mentioned that the diminishing significance of purification rites and child birth rite is seen not only in Christian Karbi families but also in some Animist Karbi families which may be due to 'modernity' or 'globalism'.

### **Impacts of the Gospel:**

The Karbi culture, folklore and literature have seen a number of changes with the advent of Christianity. Indeed, Christianity has made great impact on the Karbi society as a whole but, at the same time has also brought many changes in the traditional Karbi society. The Karbi people had to abandon many of their age-old customary practices once they accepted Christ into their lives. Their family life and village life had become different. The practice of drinking rice-beer and consumption of opium was stopped as doing these things would mean going against the Christian values. Thus, the unhealthy practice of rice-beer and opium consumption was no more prevalent among the Christian Karbis. Until the coming of Christianity, the Karbi people were animists, but Christianity brought a change in the religious life of the people. For generations, the concept of 'Good' and 'Evil' or the presence of God(Arnam) and Evil(Hi-i), presence of Tisso jonding and the concept of the Gods- Arnam atom were highly vibrant in the Karbi society and they greatly influenced the socio-religious-cultural life of the Karbis but, with the coming of Christianity, these started losing importance in the lives of the Karbi society as for the Christian Karbis, to practice them would mean, violating the Christian laws. The blood sacrifices offered to propitiate gods and spirits were now given less importance. Human sacrifice was no more practiced in the Christian community. The religious rituals have been abandoned. For instance, ritual sacrifices at the time of jhum cutting, seedling and house site selections have been replaced by Christian prayers. The superstitions, totemism, taboos and other festivals were replaced by the Christian faith and festivals. The age-old social customs and cultural practices which they considered incompatible with the Christian teachings and practices were discarded. Conversion to Christianity implied, a complete detachment from their traditional way of life. Among the old folks, the preservation of long hair as per non-Christian custom was abandoned to let others know that they have accepted Christianity. In their excitement, the converted Christian Karbis even discarded some beautiful traditional design of their traditional costumes and adopted Western dresses.

Social and religious festivals manifesting their rich culture were no longer observed and instead, they observe Christian Festivals such as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday and New Year. Christian participation in the traditional dancing and singing were discouraged and as a result, social customs associated with religious practices such as taboo, chomangkan were given up. Traditionally, marriage among the Karbi tribe was arranged by the parents and this often led to divorce and even to the practice of polygamy. But, the Christian teaching on the "permanence of marriage" gave them the opportunity of personal choice and love marriage. The one year of life-long servitude to the father-in-law by the boy as per the marriage custom was no more enforced. Instead, the newly married couple were given the opportunity to establish their own family. However, social custom of clan exogamy and endogamy were being retained. Food habits, excepting intoxicating ones, too have been retained.

**Education and literature:** Speaking of the influence of Christianity upon the educational life of the North-East Indian tribes, C.B. Firth says,

Education and Christianity came to be closely identified. The schools were not only the primary agents of evangelism but also of the new order.

The statement is quite appropriate also to that of the Karbi people. Education as such was unknown to them. They did not have written language nor script of their own. Communication of the Gospel among the illiterate people was hindered by this fact. Therefore, education was introduced among them as an agent of evangelism along with the preaching of Christian Gospel. The art of reading and writing were taught to them along with Christian teachings by the missionary teachers. Several Christian primary schools were established in the villages through the initiative of the missionaries and evangelists.

Reverend and Mrs. P.E Moore and Rev. and Mrs. J.M. Carvel opened a school at Tika in 1897 and taught regular education which was the first of its kind in Karbi Anglong. Now, this school has been upgraded to the level of a Christian English High School managed by the local Christians with the help of CBCNEI and KAAC. The coming of Christianity brought great changes in the Karbi society. The formal education and social contacts from the outside world caused many changes in the Karbi society. As a result of the mission schools established in villages and books published in Karbi language, almost all the Karbis in Karbi Anglong can read and write in their language. Education is highly valued and the literacy rate is being increased. Parents became keen to send their children to schools.

The missionaries at Tika became involved in writing and translation work including the publication of books and leaflets in Karbi. Rev. J.M. Carvel reported that, the missionaries have printed the Mikir Prime, the Glad Tidings, Mikir Hymn Book, Story of Creation and Fall of Man, Catechism, Birta, Pilgrim's Progress and some portions of the Gospels like Matthew. The Karbi Hymn Book published in 1934 was revised in 1951. Rev. Hutton, in 1954, published the whole Bible in Karbi. The contribution of the missionaries in the development of the Karbi literature is tremendous. The efforts of the Baptist and Catholic Missionaries and the colonial officers on Karbi language, whether or not they were driven by 'the interest of their own,' but what mattered most was that a very bold and positive beginning was made. The missionaries ran a newspaper in Karbi titled, 'Birta,' in 1903. A Karbi grammar appeared for the first time in 1966, when Fr. John Mariae, instrumental in founding the Diphu Don Bosco School, (in collaboration with Fr. John Timung, Fr. Cyriac Thundathil, Mr. Paulus Rongphar and Mr. Sundersing Timung for the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, published the 'Karbi- Self Taught,' a reprint (2007) of which is now available. Because of the bold beginning made in the field of 'Karbi literature' by the Christian missionaries, the Karbis of the present day can now avail help from these written literatures for further literature review. Thus, it can be said that, it is the Christian missionaries who laid the foundation of Karbi literature which, as a result has contributed to the development of modern Karbi Literature.

Modern Karbi literature is of recent origin and development. Till the last part of the twentieth century, the Karbis had only their oral literature, very rich in that. For generations, the Karbis transmitted their rich storehouse of literature through mouth. It was facilitated by the folk songs having good combination of rhyme, rhythm and subject matter. Their folk literature has all elements of folklore- social rituals, myths, metaphors, legends, historical tales, ballads of love and separation, folksongs of Sabin Alun, love songs, fables, magic chants, proverbs etc. These have been kept alive through generations through mouth. Karbi literature began to flourish in the post independence period. The formation of Karbi Lammet Amei in 1966 was an epoch-making and auspicious moment for the growth of Karbi Language and literature. Notable books published by Karbi Lammet Amei(KLA) include "short story collection like Lammet Esang, Samphri Apunsir, Dampijuk, Kungriso Mirdan" etc. Writers who have contributed to the development of Karbi literature in the recent times are Prof. Rongbong Terang, Dharamsing Teron, Morningkey Phangcho, Khirla Teronpi, Dr. Phukan Chandra Phangcho, Lunse Timung, Joysing Tokbi etc. A literary foundation called, "Jambili Literary Foundation" have been founded by some young Karbis with the motto "Bringing together ignited minds to promote literature", with Welsing Hanse as its Chairman and On Teron as its Secretary. In brief, modern or new Karbi literature has seen an era of slow but steady and remarkable development in the hands of a group of Karbi writers who are extremely conscious of and devoted to

their rich legacy, national feeling and unity, importance of preserving their language and literature and exerting their cultural and linguistic identity amidst a thousand hurdles that generally characterize Karbi Anglong.

**Impact of modernism:** The diminishing crude form of Karbi religion owes not only to the spread of Christianity amongst the Karbis but, many customs of the Karbis have vanished in the face of modernity or so-called modern sensibilities. Some form of Karbi age-old customs are seen diminishing even within the animist Karbis as a consequence of modernism in their lives. Let us take for example, the custom of “Mi-ring-rang” funeral dance that has vanished during the last few decades in the face of modernity. During the Mi-ring-rang dance, two pieces of split bamboo locked together, symbolizing male-female cohabitation is used, accompanied by songs of imaginable obscenities, specially indulged on by young males. There is absolutely no barrier on the use of explicitly suggestive erotic songs and utterances during the festival that lasts for about a week. The Mi-ring-rang song probably represented the last vestiges of the primitive fertility –rites prevalent among the Karbis. But, under the spell of a modern day taboo described by some as “the crisis of modernity”, the erotic folklore of the Karbis have vanished almost without a trace. The funeral festival, which provided an excellent occasion for young bachelors to serenade their would be brides, taking advantage of the period of sanctioned (verbal) obscenity, is now taken over by moral depravity and violence.

The ‘Karhi,’ performed as a celebration of death is as much a celebration of life in Karbi tradition. But, taboos apart, the hard economic realities are threatening to change all that. The rhythmic sounds of Karbi folk drums that once announced the ensuing funeral festival in a village nearby are fading into oblivion. Traditional drummers, once respected and recognised, the Duhuidis are a vanishing tribe. Their drumbeats no longer reverberate in young hearts and entice them to a ‘nimso-kerung’ dance interspersed with the erotic tunes of mi-ring-rang songs, because their art is no longer appreciated. ‘Karhi’ as the celebration of death is gasping for breath. This funerary ritual that embodies the philosophy of death and rebirth, eroticism and fertility, the art of music and dance, and a communal cultural activity- is in essence the cultural edifice of the Karbis. But, the tragedy now is that-the ‘chomangkan’ or ‘karhi’ is well becoming only a celebration of death and decay, reflecting the crude realities within the Karbi society which itself is gasping for survival between tradition and modernity. Perhaps, every Karbi who is keen to understand his own cultural background must also realize that ‘the analysis of death rituals can yield a profound understanding of what life means within a given culture.

I would also like to mention about rituals that accompany the community preparation and feasting of certain food items. For instance, ‘Hen-up-ahi ke-en,’ a ritual harvesting of bamboo-shoot by the entire village community has become more of a dying tradition in most of the Karbi traditional villages though the practice has not totally gone out of fashion.

To sum up, Karbi belief system is basically composed of the ‘ancestor worshipping,’ ‘worship of household deities,’ ‘territorial deities,’ and the death-ritual or ‘karhi.’ Practically, it is the ‘Hemphu-Mukrang’ duo that dominates the Karbi pantheon. A modern-day Karbi household is managing with increasing difficulty to perform these rituals, except the ‘karhi,’ which, as discussed above, has become a rarity owing to financial constraints and the dying oral generation.

Apart from this, the Karbi belief system has been variously defined as a ‘worship of demons’ from one extreme to another, which categorises it as a ‘crude form of Hinduism.’ The confused lot among the Karbis has either attempted to identify Karbi gods with some Hindu ‘gods and goddesses’ or has turned to revivalist tendencies. What however seems obvious is that- both these sections are desperate to graduate from the ‘folk’ to the ‘official’ tag for a Karbi ‘religion.’ In a larger sense, both attempts point toward a new search for identity- disparate attempts to emerge from the periphery, however without realizing that the Karbi situation must be viewed from both ‘the religious dimension of folk-culture, or the folk-cultural dimension of religion.’

The categorisation (or assimilation to be specific), of the Karbis into the ‘official’ religion has wider implication as the same old colonial ideology continues to dominate the thought process of a good number of mainstream intellectuals and the census operation. A mainstream intellectual lament sums up this colonizing attitude – ‘In recent years, of course, the trend towards racial and cultural fusion has been impeded by forces which have turned caste and tribe into political commodities. And the politics of population (or depopulation) as reflected in the census has only reinforced this colonial attitude. Anderson is right when he singled out ‘the three institutions’ of ‘the census, the map, and the museum’ which together profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state

imagined its dominion- the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry.'

**Changes in the food habits or culinary practices of the Karbis:** A Karbi cuisine is primarily divided into three broad categories namely- a) Kang-moi or alkaline preparation, b) Kalang-dang or boiled and c) Han-thor (sour/acidic preparation). There are also some other usual culinary styles followed in traditional Karbi cooking like 'Kemung,'(cooked in bamboo tubes), 'Kangthu'(wrapped with leaves and shoved into hot charcoal/ashes), 'Kephi'(roasting), 'Karnu pakreng'(frying without oil), and 'ke-ur'(smoking) .

A striking change is seen in the traditional culinary practices of the Karbis in the contemporary cooking style where, oil of mustard is extensively used in Karbi traditional culinary practice while this was not a traditional cooking style until recently. While traditional ingredients (in decreasing order) continue to form part of the modern day Karbi cooking in spite of the rapidly changing tastes and food habits, the culinary journey from 'mehip' to McDonald and 'kangmoi' to KFC, under the influence of globalization, the cultural mutation of a Karbi kitchen is almost complete without raising much smoke. Therefore, what was once sacred, the kitchen in innermost location of a Karbi household, is now occupied by corporate culinary tastes. Access to a Karbi kitchen is no longer determined by kinship but, by sheer economic realities of the time. From the religious to the secular, Karbi foods and food habits have undergone a sea change.

**Food taboos:** The golden rule that, sour and bitter ingredients are never combined in Karbi cooking is no more applicable or reliable as in the present context, it is seen that, the Karbis cook sour and bitter ingredients together. For example, the green vegetable 'Roselle leaf' and 'Bitter Gourd' are cooked together in a Karbi kitchen.

There seems to be no religious bar on eating beef but, the Karbis now, avoid consumption of beef as an influence of the Hindus.

Food as a distinct cultural or identity marker seems to have taken a backseat for the modern Karbis as no literature worth its 'salt' is forthcoming and preparing this short (and in no way comprehensive) write-up was itself a back-breaking exercise.

**Table-manner:** A traditional Karbi household is regulated by strict table-manner. The head of the house washes his hands and takes a few morsels of rice and other dishes, chants a prayer to thank the protective deities of the household and the rice-deity and at the end of the prayer, places it on the right side of his plate. 'At each meal, a pinch of the food is put aside for the God(arnam) and the eating takes place, followed by the rest of the household. This culture of offering prayers before food is slowly vanishing from the traditional Karbi household which is, because of modernism.

**Dress-patterns and ornaments:** Changes in the traditional clothing of the Karbis have been observed. The use of 'Rikong,' a loincloth, by the Karbi men is very rare as in the present day. Rikong is found to be used only in some interior place, particularly by married and aged male persons. The use of traditional turban called 'poho' is also becoming one of a rare situation in the present day Karbi society. The tradition of wearing "nohengpi" by the womenfolk is not of greater prevalence in the present day Karbi society. In the present context of a community gathering, it is often observed that, very few of the Karbi males wear their traditional attire whereas, in the case of Karbi womenfolk, it is an altogether different scene where, we see Karbi girls or womenfolk dressed in their traditional attire. There was a time when the culture of wearing Karbi traditional dress was at a loss, consequential to the spread of modernism but, today the case is different as we see the community people dressed in traditional clothing in various community gathering or occasions. A very recent trend of styling the traditional Karbi dress into varied modern fashion(long gowns, slit skirts, designed blouses etc) has been observed in many Karbi modern movies.

**Language:** The Karbis have their own language called Arleng belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The language is grouped as Mikir according to the latest classification. The Karbis, however do not have a script of their own as is the case with most hill tribes of the Northeast. Prof. Rongbong's "Karbi Lamtasam" is a monumental work for the tribe.

Changes in the use of Karbi language in their verbal and written communication is observed in the case of the plain Karbis(Dumrali Karbis) due to the intermixing of other linguistic groups with them. Even in the case of the Karbis of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, some form of changes in their language is seen which, can be due to cultural assimilation. For instance, instead of using Karbi numbers isi, hini, kethom- many of the Karbis today use the English or Assamese numbers in their day-to-day conversation. Another instance that can be cited here is that of the daily usage of English or Assamese Days of the Week or Months of the Year instead of the Karbi Days of the Week(Urmi, Durmi) or Months of the Year (Arkoi,

Thangthang). The usage of Assamese terms such as 'gorom', 'je' in daily conversations of the Karbis can also be mentioned here.

**Conclusion:** To conclude, it can be summed up that, the Karbi Culture, Folklore and Literature have not escaped 'change' in their form that could've resulted from the impact of 'new religion' or 'modernism' or 'globalization.' It is to be noted that, though the coming of Christianity may have brought unwanted changes in the traditional life of the Karbis, it has also brought about remarkable positive changes in the life of the Karbis- particularly in the field of education and literature, and in the socio-economic life of the people( giving up of Rice-beer and Opium consumption, and the Christian teaching on the "Permanence of Marriage" that gave the young traditional Karbis an opportunity of personal choice regarding their marriage instead of the parents' selection of marriage partners for them) .

There is no society or community that is 'static' or can remain static in its nature. Every society, whether big or small experiences some form of changes in its features when exposed to various cultural traits. Whether or not, a particular society can maintain its crude form is a big question. But, it is expected of us that, we, as responsible members of the community become contributing individuals in helping our society maintain its original form in all aspects by putting into practice our language, dress, belief system , food habits etc. in our day-to-day life.

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