

Tradition and Contemporary Changes in the Religious Belief of the Karbi People in Karbi Anglong, Assam

Somenath Bhattacharjee

*Department of Anthropology, Assam University, Diphu Campus,
Diphu, Karbi Anglong 782 462, Assam, India
Mobile: 09401767410, 09475393104*

E-mail: <bhattacharjee_somenath@rediffmail.com>, <somenath_audc@rediffmail.com>

KEYWORDS Nature. Culture. Religion. Animism. Tradition. Transition

ABSTRACT Assam is a rich zone of tribal cultural diversity. The Karbis are the early settlers and numerically dominant tribal group of Karbi Anglong district in Assam. Their livelihood is nourished in the lap of nature. Traditionally, they are animist and such beliefs, and practices are intimately related to their rite-de-passage, traditional economic organisation of jhum cultivation. During the last twenty years, along with Christianity, a number of significant changes have been noticed in their religious belief and practices. Configuration of temples and concept of idol worship has been noticed among them. Different new concepts of pollution and purity are noticeable in their dietary and allied livelihood practices. This paper is an attempt to know about the tradition and contemporary changes related to the religious belief and practices of the Karbis. The paper has tried to focus on the probable factors related to such changes based on primary data collected through fieldwork.

INTRODUCTION

Religion, as a concept is a cultural and universal phenomenon. Many have attempted to define religion in their own way but none of the definitions have been accepted universally. Tylor defined religion as “the belief in Spiritual Beings” (1871: 383). Frazer defined religion as “a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man, which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life” (1922: 53). Geertz stated religion as “(1) a system of symbols, which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (1973: 90).

In the context of Indian civilisation, there are two distinctive but inter-related cultural traditions,

one is formal, written, literate and reflected upon by few while the other is informal, oral, illiterate and unreflected by many. According to Redfield (1955), these can be termed as Great tradition and Little tradition, respectively. The Great traditional parts primarily include the Sanskrit Vedic Hindu literature and are being cultivated in different schools and temples in different places. The rural people often visit these places and they observe the cultural practices. These practices are imitated and performed by their own means among the village communities, which works itself out and keep itself going in the lives of unlettered village communities. In this context, the religious beliefs and practices of the tribal people have their own importance. The daily livelihood of the tribal people is closely related with their surrounding environment. The tribal culture has its own heritage and it is nourished in the lap of nature. Belief in the existence of supernatural powers or power superior is almost universal. Experiences of certain day-to-day sudden happenings of ill health, diseases, death and many other unexplainable have led tribal people into believing in other than the material visible world that is into the world of invisible spirits or supernatural power. Collectively, religious belief, rituals and religious practitioners are an integral part of their culture (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985: 236).

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Somenath Bhattacharjee,

Assistant Professor,

Department of Anthropology,

Assam University,

Diphu Campus, Diphu,

Karbi Anglong 782 462,

Assam, India

Mobile: 09401767410, 09475393104

E-mail: bhattacharjee_somenath@rediffmail.com,

somenath_audc@rediffmail.com

Theoretical Background

Redfield (1941) has stated about the folk-urban continuum and analysed civilization as a continuous process of interaction between great and little tradition (Redfield 1955). Marriott (1955) found this process of interaction through Universalisation and Parochialisation. In the Indian context, Ghurye (1950) stated that the tribes are the backward Hindus. Bose (1953) stated about the Hindu methods of tribal absorption, whereas Sinha (1965), discussed about the tribe-caste continuum in India.

Objectives

The present study is primarily focused on the following objectives.

1. To know about the animistic religious belief and concerned practices among the studied people.
2. To discuss on the emerging religious beliefs and practices among the Karbis, due to the probable influence of Hindu traditions.
3. To find out the remarkable changes in different rituals of the Karbis and their prime reasons.

METHODOLOGY

Karbi Anglong District is situated in the central part of Assam. It is one of the two hill districts in Assam and comes under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The population of the district is predominantly tribal. The major tribal ethnic groups of this district were Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Dimasas, Hmars, Garos, Rengma Nagas, etc. Besides, a large number of non-tribals also lived together in this hill region (Bey 2009: 6). The Karbis are the indigenous community of the said region (Lyll 1908: 5).

The studied people are all belonging to the Karbi tribal group, which was the numerically dominant population of the district. The present study has been done on the basis of empirical fieldwork in the selected villages under the Diphu sub-division of Karbi Anglong district. The studied areas were one of the earliest settlements of the Karbi people. The study was conducted among 372 families with a total population of 2,374. Among them were 1,192 males and 1,182

females. The livelihood of the concerned people was very much dependent on the different natural resources. Among them, animism and different other religious practices were noticed. Among the total studied (372) families, 189 (50.81) families were animist, while 79 (21.24) were Christian and 104 (27.96) belonged to the Lokhimon and Bhaktitom trust. The study was conducted during the period of April 2017 to June 2018. There were four divisions of the total fieldwork.

Division 1

Fore mostly, the general observation of the village was done along with the completion of Preliminary Census Schedule (PCS) to know the demographic composition of the studied people.

Division 2

Case studies were taken of the concerned families. These focused on the issues of their historical background, traditional occupational pursuit, their animistic religious beliefs and practices. Further, different other emerging religious practices, their reasons and concerned rituals were also known in detail.

Division 3

Detailed open structured interviews were taken from the key informant, eldest person of the settlement, leader of the traditional political organisation of the concerned society, and administrative authority related with the studied settlements. These focused to find out about the salient differences related to rituals, dress patterns and taboos, as noticed in animistic and different emerging religious practices, among the studied people.

Division 4

Data was collected to find about the fact if the newly emerging religious practices had any impact on their tribal identity or not. It was mainly collected from the key informants who were the literary elites and scholarly among the Karbi people, leading social activists within the Karbi society. During the case studies and interviews as well it was enquired from the concerned respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A brief socio-demographic and socio-economic profile of the studied people is mentioned below. The studied people were primarily associated with jhum cultivation (60.61%). Traditional weaving was the prime occupation of 24.41 percent female, while animal husbandry and kitchen gardening was the prime occupation of 10.41 percent male and 10.18 percent female, respectively. Further, among the studied population, 76.27 percent male and 78.75 percent female were illiterate. On the other hand, among the literate population it was mostly confined to primary level in cases of 56.56 percent males and 66.39 percent females. Among them Animism and different other religious practices were noticed. Among the total studied (372) families, 189 (50.81) families were Animist, while 79 (21.24) were Christian and 104 (27.96) belonged to the Lokhimon and Bhaktitom trust.

It can be noted that Das and Raha (1967), in their classical ethnography on the Rabhas of West Bengal had discussed in detail about the co-existence of Animism and Hindu rituals among the Rabha tribal people. Boro (2010) discussed the religious practices of Bathou and Brahma, among the Boro tribal people of Assam.

Animistic Religious Belief and Practices of the Karbis

Karbi religion and 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 (Teron 2011: 82-83). Thus, those Karbis who still follow the traditional practices are known as the followers of 'Hemphu-Mukrang' for which they prefer to call themselves as 'Hemphu-Mukrang Aso', which means son of Hemphu and Mukrang (Hanse 2007: 76).

Karbis believe that Hemphu is the creator and there is a creation myth of the creator himself. According to the myth, Hemphu with his sister Rasinja appeared on the bank of river Kuleng to two brothers Long-Mukrang and Bang-Mukrang. In due course, Hemphu and his sister were accommodated in the village headed by Rang-Mukrang, the father of the two brothers. Since Hemphu did not identify himself, he was

addressed to as *Langmangpo* or *Langmingpo* (one who glanced sideways). He was also addressed to as *Vo-hangpo* (one who asked for red fowl) or *Langmingpo-Vo-hangpo*. This unknown entity was later elevated to *Hemphu*, the supreme one who introduced the Karbis to new ways of worship (Teron 2011: 22-23).

The Karbis have no idols, temples or shrines (Lyll 1908:12) but they do worship the spirits of each particular space, area or territories called 'Longri Arnam' (territorial deities), which in Assamese is known as *than* (sacred place or groves). As animists, they believe that their surrounding is filled with many unseen spirits, some friendly and some angry. Animal sacrifice is an essential part of Karbi ritual performances, and the fowl is mainly preferred for sacrifice, while other animals include hen, pigeon, pig, goat and duck. Apart from animals, egg, rice, rice powder, the young stem of bamboo, leaves of banana, holy basil, etc. are essential ingredients of Karbi worships.

1] Karbi Deities

According to Phangcho (2003: 10) and Terang (2007: 82), the Karbi deities can be divided into three groups according to their function:

1. *Hem Angtar* (household deities)
2. *Rongker* (guardian spirits of villages or territorial deities)
3. *Thengpi-Thengso* (forest deities or malevolent spirits)

Hem Angtar are considered to be the most important ones, as the welfare of the household depends on the continued blessings of these guardian spirits. It is therefore observed that *Arnam kethe*, *Hemphu-Mukrang-Rasinja*, *Peng* and *Rit Anglong* are annually propitiated with due reverence. *Arnam Kethe* is the highest in Karbi pantheon. *Hemphu* together with *Mukrang* and *Rasinja* (female deity) occupy the hierarchy next to *Arnam Kethe*. *Peng* is the caretaker of a household protecting it from all diseases and calamities. *Rit Anglong* is the caretaker of the jhum field.

The deities of *Rongker* are propitiated or worshipped on a community basis and are propitiated once every year, every fourth, fifth or ten years or when the situation arises. The Karbis believe that every space, village, territories or region has its own spirits and these spirits or deities have the

powers to control diseases and natural calamities. Territorial deities are mostly propitiated during the *Rongker* festivals and these deities have the regional variation.

Thengpi-thengso are the malevolent spirits or forest deities who have the supernatural power to cause illness or diseases. So when a person gets ill the first and foremost thing to do is to propitiate these forest deities and then go for other alternatives. Some of the common spirits or deities under *Thengpi-thengso* are *Duikrai*, *Thengru*, *Chekema*, *Thengthon*, etc.

Some of the common deities and spirits worshipped by the Karbis are *Arnam Kethe*, *Hemphu-Mukrang-Rasinja*, *Peng* (guardian spirits household deities), *Rit Anglong* (guardian spirits of the jhum field or territorial deities), *Riso Arnam* (guardian spirits or deities of the youth), *Chinthong Arnam* (protective deity of the Chinthong province or regions), *Arnam Pharo* (worships of hundred gods or deities), *Longle hi'i* (deities of soil), *Murti Chekema* (malevolent or angry forest spirits), *Dor* (serpent deity), *Duikrai* (malevolent or angry forest spirits), *Kiling Arnam* (protective deity of the Kiling province or regions), *Langhe Rong anglong Arnam* (territorial deities), *Somupong Arnam* (territorial deities), *Inglongkiri arnam* (territorial deities), *Lore sarpo* (territorial deities), *Chomang Ase* (protective deity), *Tirim* (ancestors spirits), *Amlong Sarpo* (territorial deities), etc.

2] Believe in Soul

According to the Karbis, the soul or "*Karjong*" is immortal. According to them, there are different types of soul and when a person dies the soul return to his ancestors' village. In such return, the soul is guided by a female dirge singer known as '*Charhepi*' through a predestined path, so that the soul gets reunited with the dead ancestors, who can also be reborn to the corresponding clans immediately. But the dead souls can only go to the ancestors' village after the relatives perform the elaborate and expensive ceremony of '*Chomkan*', '*Chomangkan*', or '*Karhi*'. Such performances may take years due to their elaborate and expensive nature. But till such ceremony is performed, the souls remain in a 'neutral' zone and lead 'normal' after-lives.

Another soul they talked about is '*Chamburukso*', which can only belong to the ancestors. The relatives and family member of the

'*chamburukso*' offer wine and piece of dried fish before any important occasion in the household to avoid a 'spell' affecting any of the living relatives present during the occasion. This 'spell' may result in a person suddenly suffering unexplained profuse sweating, weakening or falling into vertigo. This phenomenon is described as '*chamburukso kelem*' or the victim being caught under the spell of an ancestor spirit. To avoid such a situation, in the interior of the household, small pieces of banana leaves as plates are placed on the ground for as many of the '*Chamburukso*' or ancestor spirits and wine is symbolically sprinkled and pieces of burnt dried fish offered by an older member who chants incantations praying for their blessings. Such offering is known as '*chamburukso hor kipi*' (offering wine to *chamburukso*).

'*Pharlo*' is another type of soul, which strays out of the body during sleep and roams around. Dreaming is one such expression of the wandering *pharlo*. Death may occur if the '*pharlo*' fails to return to the body. If a person becomes sickly and emaciated, it is sometimes believed that the soul or '*karjong*' is trapped somewhere by an evil spirit. In such a situation, a priest or a 'medicine-man' is called to trace and bring the 'soul' back. This practice is called '*Karjong kekur*' or 'calling of the soul'. '*Karjong kekur*' is performed when a person either has an accident or contracts some disease while away from his house. Usually, a priest visits the site where the accident occurred or the disease was contracted and performs the ritual to retrieve the soul believed to have been left behind. The priest through his incantations retrieves the soul and restores it to the owner.

In a somewhat similar practice, '*Karjong kephur*' or 'excavation of the soul', a male (*lodep*) or female (*lode-pi*) 'shaman' is employed. This shaman can communicate with the 'gods' and the 'evil spirits' and answers the queries of the household members, relatives and visitors who employ him or her. Calling of the soul, of the second type, that is, '*kephur*', the soul is believed to have left this earth and trapped in the "ancestor's village". This retrieval is done by the *lodep* or *lodep-pi* and other priests.

3] Huni-Kanti kecham or Kecham

When a person is killed by fire, guns or bows, drowns in water, commits suicide, has an accident,

suffers from a maternity case, etc. then such death is considered as unnatural death. In such cases, no one is allowed to touch or go near the dead body other than the family member and until and unless the purification process is done. The purification process known as '*Kecham*' must be conducted by a priest known as '*Kakre-pancha*' or simply '*Kakre*'. He then by cutting an egg purifies the dead body and after that, the body is cremated. In this case, cremation is not done on the main cremation ground but is cremated on another ground. After cremation, a piece of bone is collected and is brought to the main cremation ground and with some traditional procedure is dug on the ground. A person killed by an animal must be purified by a priest known as '*Ucha*' using the same procedure.

4] Rites Related to Cultivation

The Karbi traditional method of cultivation is *Jhum* or shifting cultivation. The agricultural practices of the Karbi are associated with various beliefs and rituals to appease various deities for the protection of crops, good cultivation, suitable weather, etc. Some of the rituals and festivals associated with cultivations are as follows.

- i. *Botor Kikur*: *Botor Kikur* is a ritual for good weather and rain for cultivation. The ritual is performed during the month of March and April annually to invoke the spirits of '*Botor Sarpo*' (Weather God), and the *Ha'im* (Goddess of Rain). The ritual is done on a community level.
- ii. *Longle-ahi'i*: The ritual of '*Longle-ahi*' is performed to increase the fertility of the soil to have a good production of the crops, as well as to protect the crops from diseases.
- iii. *Prisam Karkli*: *Prisam* is the diseases of crops or paddy, such as rice blast or leaf blast. To protect the paddy from such diseases, the Karbis conduct ritual performances of *Prisam Karkli*. The ritual is conducted in the *jhum* field, where the crops are sown. Ritual holy water is sprinkled all around the paddy field with plants of *So'ik* (*Croton caudatus* Geiseler) to act as pesticides.
- iv. *Chili Kapherang*: *Chili Kapherang* is a process of seed treatment before sowing of seeds in the *jhum* field. The ritual is done to protect the seeds from pest and insects and

to have a good growth quality of the seeds. It is done before the sowing of seeds in the *jhum* field.

- v. *Sang Kimi Arnam Kipi*: The ritual of '*sang kimi arnam kipi*' is performed at every new harvest, by every traditional Karbi household. At every new harvest, before consuming the new rice, or other cultivated crops for that matter, every Karbi household compulsorily performs the ritual of '*sang kimi arnam kipi*' to offer the newly harvested crops to the deities before they consume it. Such occasions are eagerly awaited and friends and relatives are invited to take part in the 'new rice eating' (*an-kimi kecho*) ceremony.
- vi. *Hacha Kekan*: It is one of the most important religious festivals observed by the Karbi. After the harvest of paddy is brought home from the field, the people celebrate the occasion of '*Sok Keroi*' (bringing of paddy) festivals. In this festival, the dance of '*Hacha Kekan*' is performed by the male performers according to the progression of the songs of '*Ru-kasen*' (the founding father of the first Karbi village settlement) and '*Kathi keplang*' (origin of paddy) while the girls serve the gatherings. The rice spirit is propitiated during the ritual by sacrificing a fowl.

5] Totemic Beliefs and Taboos of the Karbis

The Karbis revere different plants and animals as their totemic objects (Table 1). Besides, there are numbers of totemic beliefs of the Karbi, such as killing of tigers, elephants and other cats' family is a taboo for those Karbi who worshipped the spirits of those animals, and such worship is known as '*Nibot karon-Sonpi Sonbon*' (worship or propitiation to the spirits of tigers, elephants, and other animals). The worshippers of *Kiling Arnam*, including those Karbi who resides in the *Kiling* region also never kill the cats' family. Likewise, those who perform the ritual of '*Dor*' never kill snakes. '*Rui-Teron*' (a particular kind of snake) is sacred for the Teron clan, while Tokbis revere the eagles. The *Lo-Teron* tree, despite being a good source of firewood is sacred for the Teron clan, and hence it is a taboo for them to use, and it is even not allowed to touch the tree. A Karbi priest is forbidden to eat *langdung* (banana blossom/flower). The white gourd is not

only avoided by the priest but it is also a taboo to grow the plant within the boundary of his house (Table 1).

6J Major Religious Festivals of the Karbis

The Karbis celebrate different festivals and rituals in different seasons of the year. Some are conducted for the family as well the community's well being, some are for protection, some for success, some are for preventing and curing diseases, some are for crops protection and production, etc. Some of the religious festivals and rituals conducted by the Karbis are as follows.

- i. *Chojun or Arnam kethe*: *Arnam kethe* is the supreme deity and is the greatest deity in Karbi pantheon sometimes referred to as "*Sining Recho*" (Sky god). There is no fixed time or date to conduct the ritual, but it is conducted once in every three or four years depending upon the preparation needed for the ritual. In this ritual, all the kin members and relatives are invited. Those specially invited kin members and a relative come with *Horhak* (basket of liquor). The propitiation is mainly done with pigs and fowls. The ritual needs various stages of preparation such as "*Phak arme kerot*" (castration of pigs), "*Hor ketun*" (Rice beer preparation), "*Phongrong keteng*" (collection of branches of the sacred plant of *Castanopsis indica* Roxb.).
- ii. *Peng*: *Peng* is a household deity who protects and safeguards the household against all natural and supernatural ill effects and diseases. The ritual is performed annually, and the 'altar' is placed atop the main door of the house. An earthen 'altar' is also prepared at the time of the main ritual. During the ritual, a fowl and a goat are sacrificed, and '*Mir'ang*' (*Celosia argentea*/Red cock's comb) is the main plant used, and besides bamboo, plantain leaves, betel nut, and leaves, etc. are also used.
- iii. *Rit Anglong*: *Rit* means jhum field and *Anglong* means hills, so the deity is supposed to be the caretaker of the jhum field or simply deities of the jhum hills. The ritual is done for the protection and safeguarding of the family members who are going for the jhum cultivations, moreover for the protections of their crops in the jhum fields so to have a good production.
- iv. *Rongker*: It is observed annually, every fourth, fifth or ten years or when it is needed. The main purpose of *Rongker* is to appease the territorial deities for the protection of the village or regions from any kind of natural calamities, diseases, to ensure the well being of the people and to have a good farming season during the period. There are different types of *Rongker* and these are, *Than Rongker*, *Pirda Rongker*, *Wophong Rongker*, *Dengia Rongker*, *Ajo Rongker*. In all these *Rongker*, propitiation to Hemphu, Mukrang and Rasinja is common since they are believed to be the greatest gods or deities of the Karbis. The propitiation to other deities varied from village to village, and from region to region, as well as varied among the type of *Rongker* since the deities invoked are from nearby rivers, forest, streams, hills/mountains etc.
 - a. *Than Rongker*: This type of *Rongker* is observed annually by the people of the village to appease the nearby territorial deities. This type of *Rongker* is generally observed after harvest of the crops, that is, in the month of January.
 - b. *Pirda Rongker*: This type of *Rongker* is also observed annually by all the villagers for the wellbeing and protection of the village from natural calamities, diseases, animals, etc. and to have a good farming season during the period.
 - c. *Vophong Rongker*: This type of *Rongker* is greater than the above two type of *Rongker* and is performed in the *mauza* level, which has a cluster of villages. Since *Vophong Rongker* is the extension of the above two type of *Rongker*, therefore the deities propitiated are of the rivers, streams, hills, mountains, forest, groves, etc. that fall within or adjacent to the area of a *mauza*, for the betterment and prosperity of all the people of the villages of a *mauza*, also to maintain peace and harmony among the people of the area.
 - d. *Ajo Rongker*: The villagers observe this annually. The ritual is done at night, and the main purpose of the ritual is to drive out the evil spirits, epidemics, as well as diseases from the villages. In this ritual, a cowries or dice will be dropped in each household of the village and the evil spirits

Table 1: Totemic beliefs of the Karbis

S. No.	Totemic objects and their beliefs			
	Local name	Common name	Associated clan/sub-clan	Belief(s)
1	<i>Vo-Terang</i>	Hornbill	Terang	As per the beliefs, one of the brothers of Terang clan was saved by the bird when the other brother tries to kill his own brother.
2	<i>Chehang</i>	Monitor Lizard	Kiling (Sub-clan of Timung)	The clan strictly prohibits the killing of Monitor Lizard believing that the reptile is the vehicle of Killing deity.
3	<i>Vo-mumpo</i>	Pinon- Imperial Pigeon	Timung	Killing the bird may cause health issues to the associated clan, there is also a belief that once the bird has save the life of one of the clan members thus they never go for killing or injured the birds.
4	<i>Ingsum</i>	-	Engti/Ingti	Beliefs that, the plant has once saved the life of the clan members during severe floods. Thus the clan members never consumed or touch the plants.
5	<i>Vojaru</i>	Racket-tailed Drongo	Whole Karbi Community	The crafted bird is seen atop of the ' <i>Jambili athon</i> '. The bird is beliefs to be the King of birds and is compared with the traditional Karbi king. Thus they pay respect for the birds and never kill it.
6	<i>Arhi</i>	-	Rongpi	It is beliefs that, cutting/touching the plant can cause hand rashes to the Rongpi clan; moreover, it is beliefs that the plant has saved the life of the clan members during severe floods. The plant is also used during the rituals of ' <i>Chojun</i> ' and is beliefs as one of the sacred plants of ' <i>arnam kethe</i> '.
7	<i>Karpu</i>	Pangolin	Rongpi; Timung	Rongpi clan beliefs that, it has once helped the clan members by showing the path during jhum cultivations. While Timung clan beliefs that the animal has saved their life during the war. During the war, they defeated and were locked in a room. The house was then set to fire by their enemies, but luckily they found a pangolin digging hole to escape. They followed the pangolin and found themselves in the forest. Thus from that day they never kill the pangolin and counted as their own clan member.
8	<i>Voleng</i>	Woodpecker	Engleng (sub-clan of Engti/Ingti); whole community	Beliefs that the bird has once saved their life during the war. During the war, the clan member was forced to hide on the jungles at that time the bird provides food for them as they were hungry. The crafted bird is seen on the ' <i>jambili athon</i> '. Beliefs to be the followers of traditional Karbi king.
9	<i>Methan</i>	Dogs	Whole Karbi Community	Beliefs that during the creation of human being as Karbi, gods created two dogs namely Sibong and Sibe to guards and protects the Karbis from the haunted evil. Thus killing the animal is a serious offense for the Karbis.
10	<i>Vojangphong</i>	-	Teron	They counted the bird as their own sisters and never kill them and don't allow others to kill the birds.
11	<i>Chehe</i>	Crab	Terang; Whole Karbi Community	As per the beliefs, one of the brothers of Terang clan was saved by the bird when the other brother tries to kill his own brother. The Karbis especially the priests strictly avoid killing of crab. Killing or eating the crab can brings divine punishment to the person involved as well as their family members.
12	<i>Tiji or Timur</i>	-	Whole Karbi Community	Beliefs to possess some miraculous powers. Beliefs that god first created human beings under this plants.

Source: Field study

will be driven out with thorny bushes. After driving out the evil spirits, the upper and lower entrance of the village will be closed for evil spirits, epidemics, as well as for diseases through ritual enchanting and the process is known as *Rongphu-Rongling kangthin* (blocking of the upper and lower entrance of the village).

- v. *Thengpi-Thengso*: *Thengpi-Thengso* are the malevolent spirits who can cause illness, sufferings or diseases to a person. Propitiation to the spirits is made to get rid from illness, diseases, etc. However, when a person gets ill or is contacted by those spirits then a diviner will be called to identify the cause of illness (in many cases the priest himself act as a diviner). After identifying the cause of illness, the priest will then performed a process called *Se'kechak* (lit. oral/voice promise/covenant), which is an oral promise/covenant made to the spirits or deities whoever is responsible for the illness through some enchanting. The main ritual or propitiation to the spirits will be done when patients are cured, and if not cured then it is not compulsory to conduct the ritual. This type of ritual is conducted as the situation arises, and there is no fixed time and date. Some of those malevolent spirits include *Duikrai*, *Chekema*, *Thengru*, *Murti*, *Thengthon*, etc.
- vi. *Birth rites*: When a child is born in a family, it is necessary to propitiate *Hemphu* (Supreme Karbi deity), and such propitiation to *Hemphu* is called *Vur-kamatha*. But before this, another ritual called *Voti Kepan* (lit. cutting an egg) is performed on the onset of the delivery of a child. The ritual is done to drive away evil spirits from the boundary of the house and also to get rid of any probable mishap that jeopardises safe delivery. No earthen altar is prepared for this ritual, and the material required for the ritual is a banana leaf, bamboo branch, egg and rice. The ritual is performed by cutting off an egg. After birth, the ritual of "*Vur-kamatha*" is performed along with the ritual of "*Lang-apirdong*" generally two to three months after birth. These two rituals are generally conducted on the same day. "*Lang-apirdong*" is performed to purify the newborn child. It is believed that the

newborn child comes with a state of impurity. In order to purify the child from this condition, the ritual of "*Lang-apirdong*" is performed in the nearby river to wash all the impurities. During the rituals, a prayer for the longevity life of the child is also chanted.

After completion of the ritual of "*Lang-apirdong*", the priest and the family member (male members) return home and conduct the ritual of "*Vur-kamatha*". It is believed that until and unless the ritual of "*Vur kamatha*" is conducted the child is not considered as a Karbi, though he/she is purified. The child can only be adopted as one of the clan members of the community after the ritual is conducted. After that, the naming of a child is done through "*sang-kelang*" (divination). Generally, the priest himself acts as the diviner and determines the identity of the person who has taken rebirth as per the Karbi belief of reincarnation. The child is named in accordance with the identity of the "*Menchi*" (previous personality). During the process of divination, the diviner utters the name of each "*menchi*" till the identity of the child belonging to a particular "*menchi*" is established. When the identity is established, the name of a child is thus given and a thread is tied on the right wrist of the baby.

- vii. *Marriage rites*: Marriage among the Karbis is a preferential one and cross cousin marriage is the one socially accepted. Marriage among the same clan is incestuous, and any violation of this leads to public banishment. The marriage ceremony of the Karbis is called *Adam Asar* and there are various stages to complete the ceremony. The ritual performed during the marriage ceremony is also called "*Vur-kamatha*" since it is also propitiation to *Hemphu*. The ritual is done get the blessings of *Hemphu* for the longevity and happy life of the newly wedded couple. There are different kinds of propitiating *Hemphu* during the marriage ceremony and these are, *Hemphu vo'ejon* (propitiation to *Hemphu* with one red fowl), *Hemphu vo'jonthom* (propitiation to *Hemphu* with two red fowls and a hen), *Hemphu bi'doipet* (propitiation to *Hemphu* with one goat along with the two fowl and a hen), and *Hemphu Chingthong*.

viii. *Death rites*: The Karbis perform funeral rites at the time of the cremation of the deceased and death ceremony at a later date for the reunion of the soul of the deceased with its ancestors. Immediately after death occurs, the dead body is bathed and rested on a bamboo mat. Necessary dresses and clothes are given by the family to cover the dead body. Rice and curry are prepared by a woman, known as *Uchepi* near the dead body. The lament singer known as *Charhepi* feeds the deceased through her lament songs. The dead body is kept in the house to allow relatives and kin members to pay their last respects to the departed. After cremation, a banana leaf is placed on the ground with foodstuff. *Charhepi* then instructs the departed soul through his singing that “the food stuff is ready for you and you may have it and go to your destination and we will also return home”. Three days after the cremation, the singer with the family members accompanied by relatives and kin members go to the cemetery again with some foodstuff. *Charhepi* then asks the departed soul to appear before them and instructs it to take the foodstuff brought specially for him through her lament songs. It is believed that the departed soul can appear in the form of spider, dove or pigeon, etc. After providing the foodstuff they return home and the family members conduct the ritual of “*Arbung-arphe Kecham*”.

- a. *Arbung-arphe Kecham*: The ritual of *Arbung-arphe Kecham* is also known as *Vur-kamatha*. The ritual is propitiation to *Hemphu* and is done for purifying the household. In this ritual a fowl is sacrificed and other material requirements includes the bamboo branch for *Anghoi-alangthe*, rice, rice powder, banana leaf, etc.
- b. *Chomkan*: After the funeral ceremony, the death ceremony called “*Chomkan*” or “*Karhi*”, popularly known as “*Chomangkan*” is performed at a later date for reuniting the departed souls with those of the souls of ancestors. The performance of *Chomkan* is a must for Karbis irrespective of social status and economic position. In order to minimise the cost, sometimes, the dead ceremony of a few deceased persons of a family is

performed together. The festivals generally last for three nights and four days and a popular dance known as ‘*Nimso Kerung*’ is performed during the festivals. Another dance includes ‘*Banjar kekan*’, and *Chong-Chingnang*.

- c. *Huni-Kanti kecham or Kecham*: When a person is killed by fire, guns or bows, drowns in water, commits suicide, has an accident, suffers from a maternity case, etc. then such death is considered as unnatural death. In such cases, no one is allowed to touch or go near the dead body other than the family member and until and unless the purification process is done. The purification process known as ‘*Kecham*’ must be conducted by a priest known as ‘*Kakre-pancha*’ or simply ‘*Kakre*’. He then by cutting an egg purifies the dead body and after that, the body is cremated. In this case, cremation is not done on the main cremation ground but is cremated on another ground. After cremation, a piece of bone is collected and brought to the main cremation ground and with some traditional procedure dug on the ground. A person killed by an animal must be purified by a priest known as ‘*Ucha*’ using the same procedure.

7] Animistic Religious Specialists

The religious specialists of the Karbis as told by the respondents are as follows.

- i. *Kurusar*: He is a part-time religious specialist or priests. His role is usually to perform the ritual associated with household deities such as “*Hem-Angtar*”. In most of the cases, the male head of the household acts himself as the “*Kurusar*”. His role is limited only to the household or family level.
- ii. *Doeri*: He is also a part-time priest, and his main role is to perform the rituals on behalf of the community members, as well as for the entire village. As compared to “*Kurusar*”, a “*Doeri*” is much more knowledgeable in terms of ritual performances. Apart from “*Hem-Angtar*”, a “*Doeri*” can perform a number of rituals such as “*Rongker*”, “*Thengpi-Thengso*”, etc.
- iii. *Thek’kere*: *Thek’kere* (lit. knowledgeable person) is a special category of the priest,

who is believed to master almost every ritual including black magic. It is believed that he can either cure patients or can curse a person using his magical power.

- iv. *Ucha*: He is also a special class of priest who is believed to be able to tame tigers. Whenever a person is either attack or killed by a tiger or other animals then family members must call an “*Ucha*” to purify the body of the death person. Except for *Ucha*, no other priest or person is allowed to touch or purify the body of the dead person. It is believed that a person killed by a tiger cannot take rebirth in the Karbi community.

8/ Materials Used in Rituals and Parts of Different Plants Used in Rituals

The Karbis use different plants and animals in their religious festivals and rituals as mentioned below (Tables 2 and 3). On the basis of the collected data it was found that there several Sacred Groves in the said region, like Ronghang Rongbong, Inglong Kiri, Ritasor, Bichikri, Arlongpuru, Mahamaya and Rek Anglong. It is to be mentioned here that in the studied Sacred Groves as well as in adjacent localities a number of plants were recognised as very significant by the Karbi people. They use different parts of such

plants in their major religious festivals and rituals. Each such collection had certain norms and taboos, which are strictly maintained by them. Generally, all such collections were conducted in daytime and it was done by both the males and females. However, any pregnant woman or if a women was menstruating during the said time, are forbidden from such collection. Primarily, the adults did all such collections and generally the children abstain from it.

Emerging Religious Practices

In the present day context, there are a number religious groups among the Karbi like ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Joyguru or Sat Sang, Christian, Shiv Sanatan, Lokhimon, Bhaktitom Trust, Hindu Honghari, Arlong Chehu, etc. Among them, Lokhimon, Bhaktitom Trust, Hindu Honghari and Arlong Chehu are the new religious form or groups among the Karbi, which synthesises from the mainstream Hindu religion.

1/ Karbi Bhaktitom Trust

This new religious form among the Karbi was started by Smt. Ambika Tokbipi. She was inspired by the divinity of *Longsang Mukrang* (which according to her is Lord Shiva) and had gathered

Table 2: Materials use in Karbi rituals

S. No.	Traits/materials items	Purpose of use/significance
1	Hor kangthir (Holy rice beer)	Offer to deities; ancestor spirits
2	Bongkrok (Bottlegourd/Gourd shell)	Container of holy rice beer
3	Sang/ Sang'lok (Rice)	Soak rice offer to deities
4	Him'aduk (Rice powder)	Cooked with sanctified meat; sprinkles on earthen altar
5	Banta (Areca nut and leaf)	Offer to deities
6	Beng (Dry Fish)	Offer to the spirits of deceased master priest
7	Hor-arak (Liquor)	Offer to deities; spirits of deceased master priest
8	Sakhi (Ritualistic coins/rings)	Use to end the ritual by beating with “ <i>Noke</i> ” (Knife) for nine times (belief that beating of “ <i>sakhi</i> ” signifies a prove of ritual conduction)
9	Hanmi-hanmoi (Curry cooked with alkali)	Use to offer deities
10	Arnam-Hotton (Basket meant for deities)	Use to store all the collected/prepared materials that are use in the ritual
11	Aput (Bamboo stick)	In case goat or duck is use for sacrifice then bamboo stick called “ <i>aput</i> ” is use for holding goat or duck for sacrifice
12	Anghoi (Piece of spilled bamboo)	A miniature sitting arrangement for the deities
13	Alangthe (Piece of bamboo)	A miniature water pail for drinking arrangement for the deities.
14	Avophong (Bamboo leaf & Branch)	A decoration made for the deities
16	Dubop (A bended Bamboo strip)	A decoration made for the deities

Source: Field study

Table 3: Different plants used by the Karbis in different rituals

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Local name of the plant</i>	<i>Parts used</i>	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Purpose of use</i>
1.	<i>Arhe</i>	Branches	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
2.	<i>Birik</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
3.	<i>Phongrong</i>	Branches	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
4.	<i>Vomu achimi</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
5.	<i>Kaipho</i>	Stem	<i>Chojun</i> and other ritual	Familial well being
6.	<i>Phelang</i>	Leaves	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
7.	<i>Cehe lobor</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
8.	<i>Hanthu</i>	Leaves	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
9.	<i>Nimsopéchok</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
10.	<i>Loru</i>	Leaves	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
11.	<i>Ahom birik</i>	Fruits	<i>Chojun</i>	To purify the plants used for the rituals
12.	<i>Hepi</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
13.	<i>Tarsing Chingnan</i>	Stem and twigs	<i>Chojun</i> and <i>Someme</i>	Post to construct platform and to cure infertility.
14.	<i>Mirtaksu</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
15.	<i>Pharkong</i>	Twigs	<i>Someme</i>	To prevent the influence of evil spirit.
16.	<i>Cho-ik</i>	Leaves	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
17.	<i>Mongjin</i>	Twigs	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
18.	<i>Pharche</i>	Twigs	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
19.	<i>langmi reng</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
20.	<i>Timur</i>	Leaves	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
21.	<i>Arlak</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
22.	<i>Tiji arong</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
23.	<i>Pak arong</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
24.	<i>Suve</i>	Twig	<i>Kachecham</i>	To purify the soul of a person who met up with accidental death.
25.	<i>Thengmu</i>	Twig	<i>Duikhrai</i>	To nullify the influence of evil spirit in sacred groves.
26.	<i>Tamsir</i>	Twigs	<i>A jo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of enemy.
27.	<i>Kove</i>	Fruits	<i>Rong Arnam, Rit Anglong</i>	Familial well being.
28.	<i>Arpik</i>	Stem	<i>Lamke maja</i>	To protect family from the influence of enemy.
29.	<i>Samphat</i>	Stem	<i>A jo aseh</i>	To redress the effect of evil spirit on family.
30.	<i>Pre</i>	Leaves	<i>A jo Rongker</i>	To protect community from epidemic disease.
31.	<i>Hijung</i>	Resin	<i>All household rituals.</i>	Used for fragrance.
32.	<i>Ingre</i>	Entire plant	<i>Kachecham</i>	To purify the soul of a person who met up with accidental death.
33.	<i>Narlong</i>	Twig	<i>A jo Rongker</i>	To protect community from epidemic disease.
34.	<i>Tara</i>	Leaves	<i>Rong Arnam</i>	Homestead protection.
35.	<i>Mir-ang</i>	Twig	<i>Peng Arnam</i>	Familial protection.
36.	<i>Maharlosum</i>	Leaves	--	To cure a protruding man.
37.	<i>Chorlengso</i>	Twigs	<i>Dor</i>	To prevent epidemic disease.
38.	<i>Ingthum</i>	Leaves	<i>Ingthum</i>	To cure boils.
39.	<i>Cheri</i>	Twigs	<i>Duikhrai</i>	To nullify the influence of evil spirit in sacred groves.
40.	<i>Phang</i>	Leaves	<i>Vo phang phang aseh</i>	Child health perspective.

S. No.	Local name of the plant	Parts used	Ritual	Purpose of use
41.	<i>Hi-i-ar-ipak</i>	Leaves	<i>Toksari</i>	Prevent frightened dreams.
42.	<i>Chilimpui</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chokorbura</i>	Protection of entire family.
43.	<i>Bong</i>	Shell	<i>In every ritual</i>	For offering rice beer to Deities.
44.	<i>Bab kangsam</i>	Twigs	<i>Lamkeh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
45.	<i>Banchek</i>	Entire plant	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
46.	<i>Sibu</i>	Entire plant	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
47.	<i>Tarme</i>	Leaves	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To redress the curses of enemy.
48.	<i>Phlom phlom</i>	Entire plant	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
49.	Langdun lathe	Leaves and flower.	<i>In every ritual</i>	To appease supernatural power.
50.	<i>Mirkem</i>	Entire plant	<i>Death ceremony</i>	Prevent any evil effect.

Source: Bhattacharjee 2015: 139-140

her spiritual knowledge in dreams from different gods and goddesses such as *Hemphu*, *Mukrang*, *Rasinja* (in the form of Durga), *Pithe Ningrepi* (in the form of Maa Saraswati), *Sot Recho*, *Rangsina Sargo*, *Purthimi Kungripi*, etc. On 2nd July 2005 this new religious form took birth at the head office of Karbi Lammet Amei, Diphu, with the aim of uniting the Karbi and to remove the curse given by *Sot Recho* to the Karbi society. On the same day, "*Bhaktitom Longsang Mukrang Temple*" was established at Chiphongsajir near Diphu-Lumding Road, and on 3rd October 2008 it was formally inaugurated. Since then this religious temple came to be known as "*Bhaktitom Longsang Mukrang Temple*". This religious temple has become a centre stage of Karbi belief and faith in the existence of gods and goddesses and has extended to the entire district of Karbi Anglong and Assam. Every 5th February is celebrated as "*Sot Recho Karcho*" where all walks of Karbi Hindu believers takes a holy dip in the sacred Kopili River at a place called '*Koka*' in the western part of Karbi Anglong district of Assam. "*Hemphu Karcho*" is another important festival for them, which is celebrated on 14th September every year as "*Kur Chingthur Amei*". It is a mass prayer meeting where thousands of devotees take part in the prayer meeting organised by the *Karbi Bhaktitom Trust*.

2/ Lokhimon

Lokhimon, which is believed to be the *Avatar* of Hindu God Vishnu, is a new form of religion,

and is called Karbi Lokhimon Adhorom. This religion is diverted from the Karbi traditional religion (Animist) and distinguished from the Hindu religion. Lokhimon has its own temple, and no such idol or image. Their mantras are all in Karbi language, and like Hindu religion, they also perform a 'Goygo', and belief in an omnipotent God. Lokhimon is the faith of thousands of the Karbis in areas like some pockets of Karbi Anglong district, N C Hill, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and southern part of Arunachal Pradesh (Kokila) especially the areas where Karbis are inhabited. It has divided into four Dovan longris (Ashram) and each dovan longri is divided into a number of clusters, and each ashram and each cluster has one temple. Each cluster temple is known 'Sangha'. The temple or sangha is governed by the central committee. Lokhimon religion has a specific dress code for both married and unmarried males and females. All these dresses are from original Karbi culture, which is slightly modified in its design. This religion is preached by their Holiness Kurusar, that Lokhimon is an omnipotent and farm less. His prophecies of preaching are unique and wondrous. Lokhimon is the outcome of Hindu religion.

The word 'Lokhimon' has been derived from the two Karbi words of 'Lokhi' and 'Mon', which mean 'Chethe' or 'Breath' and 'Karjong' or 'Soul' meaning a living soul, respectively. In other words, Lokhimon denotes that every human being takes food to live or survive, and if a human being is survived then there exists a soul, that is, the soul

is immortal. According to some views, Lokhimon religion developed and originated from the founder person named 'Lokhon' and then renamed as 'Lokhimon'. It is also believed that the term Lokhimon has been derived from the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity *Laxmi*. They stated that, the Karbis were associated with various agricultural productions, and the Hindu goddess of food, wealth and production is *Laxmi*. Along with that, they also had cattle. Such issues became significantly influential for their acceptance of Lokhimon. Even by following the rituals of Assamese caste society, prior to day of *Rongali Bihu*, Lokhimon people used to celebrate the *Goru Bihu*, that is, the worship of their cattle wealth.

The Lokhimon believers follow 'Thursday' for religious observance, and Thursday is an auspicious day. On this day they take rest, with the belief that every living thing is created by God, and this day is the day that every living things should pray for their creature God. It is also believed that they may be a sin that they might have committed in other six days of a week by worshipping in their temple, to eat boiled vegetarian meals and they avoid the use of oil and soap on this particular day. The Lokhimon believers start the day by taking a bath early in the morning, by wearing a clean white dress and also their own dress code and offer prayers at Lokhimon temple and perform yajna. Some devotees offer fruits, flowers, etc. to the Lord. After yajna, they sing a devotional song by clapping hands in praise of Lord Vishnu to redeem of sin and stand by their side all times.

a. *Material used in Lokhimon religion:*

Lokhimon religion has no such idol or image and does not believe in sacrifices. It is the wish of devotees to offer any material. Their Holiness says, "One can offer a flower in worship, if not it is enough to pray with pure heart". The essential materials require for worship are:

- i. *Tulsi* (Basil)
- ii. Holy water
- iii. *Tipli* (kind of soft grass)
- iv. *Harlung* (bowl) for storing water
- v. *Kasu* (king of plate) for keeping some flowers, fruits, etc.
- vi. Finely cut wood and leaves of mango
- vii. Finely cut wood and leaves of jackfruits

- viii. Finely cut wood and leaves of bel
- ix. *Melur* (Dia)
- x. Mustard oil
- xi. Throat
- xii. Flower (marigold)
- xiii. Ginger
- xiv. Turmeric
- xv. Different kind of mustard seeds
- xvi. Different kind of sesame seeds
- xvii. Chandan
- xviii. *Tilok*
- xix. *Sangkha*
- xx. Bell

Using flowers like Hibiscus are strictly prohibited in the temple during worship but are important at the time of healing of a sick or ill person. The marigold flower is an auspicious flower used in a temple for worship, and offering marigold flower is equivalent to animal sacrifices.

Lokhimon religion is a type of reformation and distinguished from the Hindu and Karbi traditional religion (Animist). The difference can be notice from the way of material offering to the God, kurupo sits in the temple with white loin, wearing *logun* or sacred thread across his body and chanting on behalf of the devotees and put *phot* or *tika* or a round mark, on the forehead of every devotees who worship in the temple. If anybody affects the evil spirit certain rituals are perform by offering bhog to God. In case it is serious, then certain Yajnas are performed with the help of the above given materials. The Lokhimon religion strictly maintains their food habits. On every Thursday, they eat a boiled pure vegetarian diet. They can consume fish, mutton and eggs except on Thursday. The diet of a Lokhimon priest is always pure vegetarian. The Lokhimon believers follow the food habits of disciples. Pork, hor (wine), meat of killed by other animals, ritualistic foods of Animist, and hanserong (Mesta) are regarded as very strict food taboos.

Consuming hor (wine), meat, etc. is restricted during marriage. Sacrifice is restricted. Their Holiness says, "No demand, more helpful during marriage". The Lokhimon believer believes that 'marriage is considered as the coming of Goddess of wealth'. The bride is regarded as Goddess *Laxmi*, which is the Goddess of wealth.

Tulsi is believed to be a holy plant among the Lokhimon and others religion. In Lokhimon worshipping, *Tulsi* is used in every occasion such

as rituals, ceremonies and it is commonly used in the temple. Every morning, after bathing they water their body or around the temple or house with Tulsi leaves, which is kept for purification. All the materials, which are to be used in the temple, are washed with water and Tulsi leaves, as they believe that only Tulsi can purify the impurities. So, Tulsi is worshipped and used by the Lokhimon religion.

b. *Rituals related to birth*: When the mother delivers a baby, they are not allowed to enter the temple for fifteen days. They call the temple as *Dowan*. After fifteen days they offer prayer in the *dowan*, the baby boy is given a *Logun/honjeng*, and if it is a girl a thread is tied on the neck as necklace called as *sumlek*.

c. *Rituals related to marriage*: The marriage rituals of Lokhimon religion are far different from the marriage rituals of traditional Karbis. In Lokhimon religion, use of hor (wine), bong, horth and animal sacrifices is totally absent during marriage. Instead of using these, they used rice flour, sugar beet, flowers, garland, melur (dia), and some gifts (dress for both father and mother of bride). The marriage rituals are not very different from mainstream Hindus. The marriage will be held in the temple, perform *yajna* and moves around the burning fire of the *yajna* by putting garlands to each other. This is known as 'Pangri- Pangdon', which is 'Adam-Asar' in traditional Karbi marriage system. During the marriage ceremony they light five earthen lamps, but if the ceremony is done after having children then only three earthen lamps are lighted, if the ceremony takes place after anyone of their partner's death then only two lamps are lit but if they perform the ceremony after both the bride and groom's death then only one lamp is lit. If the bride is from other community they do not change the clan of the bride like the Karbi animist. They do not marry within the clan. Consuming hor (wine), meat, etc. is restricted during marriage. Sacrifice is restricted. Their Holiness says, "No demand,

more helpful during marriage". The Lokhimon believers believe that 'marriage is considered to be the coming of Goddess of wealth'. The bride is regarded as Goddess Laxmi, which is the Goddess of wealth.

d. *Rituals related to death*: After death the body is covered with a cloth, and a flower garland is placed on the body, and a lamp is lit. The body is taken for cremation on that day itself, and on their way to the cemetery they tell the biography of the deceased person. Either the son or the spouse follows the body taking an earthen lamp, and then after the body is kept on the pyre they keep a piece of wood on the body. The purification process is done on the day of cremation itself, they clean the floor with mud if it is a mud house, if it is a concrete house they clean with Tulsi water, and then they light a lamp on a stool (*pira*).

e. *Dress pattern*: The women have a tattoo like a bindi on the forehead. They say that among the animistic Karbi in some of the rituals women are not allowed to take part, and thus among the Lokhimon, the tattoo shows an empowerment status, as they allow the women to take part in all the rituals. They wear a dress similar to the traditional Karbi dress, and the only difference is in the colour, that is, the men folk wear green traditional jacket and *seleng*. The womenfolk wear yellow colour *pe-kok*. The young girl wears *pe-seleng* just as the Karbi traditional *pe-seleng*.

f. *Food Taboo*: Any Lokhimon believer is strictly prohibited to consume beef and pork. Although among the Animistic and Christian Karbis pork is considered as a delicacy. Thursday is considered as an auspicious day and they do not eat non-vegetarian food on this day. It is considered as a day for fasting also.

3) *Sabin Alun: The Karbi Ramayana*

The epic of Ramayana is popularly known as 'Sabin Alun' among Karbis, derived from the oral

folk song of the Karbi. It seems to have started in 14th or 15th century, and is being transmuted from one generation to another generation. In *sabin alun*, lot of regional variation can be noticed. Sabin alun is a grandmother who tells a story to the grandchildren.

The Valmiki Ramayana and Sabin alun are the same, but regional diversities and regional influences can be noticed. In sabin alun Ravana has twelve hands as ten hands in the traditional Valmiki Ramayana. In sabin alun, Sita is Sinta Kungripi, King Dasarath is Dhorom recho, King Janaka is Bamonpo, Hanuman is Uliman and Ram-Lakhsman are Ram- Lokhon. King Janaka was not indicated as the royal atmosphere; rather he practices jhum and watches the crops from Hemtap (a hut built on the top of a tree). Even King Dasarath lived in a thatch house.

In Sabin Alun, Ram is banished to Narayan Anglong (Narayan Hills). The bird Vomu (eagle named jatayu) who was the maternal uncle of Ram was shown. Ram also went in search of a golden deer, and Lokhon also went in search of Ram his brother and met Ram in the "Malam" hills. But when Lokhon finds him (Ram), he loses his senses by the prinking of Ravana's arrows. Uliman (Hanuman) goes to 'Malong soleng' hills to bring the life saving plant, and when Uliman could not find it, he brings the whole Malongsoleng hills to Lokhon.

4) Hindu Honghari

This new religious form is established at Sirkangnep, Diphu Karbi Anglong by a section Karbi. On 29th July 2014 a committee named "*Hindu Honghari Ganesh Mandir Committee*" was formed. Accordingly, Mr. Dilip Teron was chosen as the working president and Mr. Gotom Timung as the General Secretary. Mr. Jeeten Teron who holds the position of finance secretary is the head priest of this religious group. Like the Lokhimon, this new religious group or form is also a variation of Vaishnavism. The religious preaching of this religious group is based on the preaching of Lord Ganesh and their preaching is slowly extending to some of the villages like Totlun Rongphar (Dentaghat), Lokhon Bey (Jaipong, Langhin), Doidak Chingakang Ingti (Langhin), etc. Every year, the 15th of July is celebrated as the foundation day of the Hindu Honghari Adhorom Barim (HHAB).

5) Arlong Chehu Dhonesh Adhorom

This new religious form is mainly active in the Deithor region of Bokajan sub-division. This new religious form has its base at Arlong Chehu Hanse Village, Deithor and is led by Mr. Dhonsing Hanse who is also the head priest of this new religious group. This new religious group also has a committee called "*Karbi Shiva Bhakti Arlong Chehu Dhonesh Dhorom Committee*". Mr. Sarsing Timung is the president of the committee and the committee is responsible for holding various programs for this new religious group. This new religious form or group is actively working on preaching the 'Shiva Bhakti' among the followers. Every year during the month of July the followers of this new religious group holds a Kanwar Yatra or popularly known as "Bol Bam". The devotees of this religion travel barefoot with saffron clothes and in saffron ropes with their Kanwar (walking sticks used to hang the urns of water) in groups in various routes by saying "Bol Bam" and return to their local at "*Arlong Chehu Shiva Bhakti Temple*" and pour the holy water on Lord Shiva (*Shiv Linga*).

Changes Made By Emerging Religious Forms

Regarding the changes made by the emerging religious form or groups, the responses came from all the respondents that with the change into new faiths, most of the traditional cultural aspects as well as the religious aspects of the Karbi have been changing or modified by the new religious form or groups. Some of the changes or modifications made by the new religious forms or groups are as follows.

1) Change of Religious Symbol

The Animistic religious symbol of the Karbi is a *Bong* (gourd shell), placed on a banana leaf and on the tip a piece of folded banana leaf should be placed. Karbi Bhaktitom Trust, the new religious form of the Karbi made a modification of the symbol of *Bong*, and they just added the symbol of "Oi" (according to them in the worship of Karbi, there is always the utterance of the word 'oi', such as 'Oi Hemphu Arnam', 'Oi Mukrang Arnam', 'Oi Rasinja Arnam' etc.) so with this philosophy they added the symbol of 'oi' on the traditional

bong, which they believe to be the symbol of their organisation. In the case of Lokhimon, they use *Diya* (clay lamp) as their religious symbol.

2) Change of Traditional Dress

The traditional dress of the Karbi, both for the men and women has been modified by the new religious forms or groups. The women of Lokhimon religion wear white, yellow, green or saffron coloured '*Pekok*' (traditional dress of Karbi women) with a white or green blouse in any religious ceremony of Lokhimon religion. The men wear the white, green, saffron, and reddish brown shirts called '*Choi hongthor*' (traditional dress of Karbi men) with a white, green or saffron dhoti. Regarding the designing pattern of the dress, they put the design of flower and *diya* (clay lamp). The women of Bhaktitom and Hindu Honghari religion mostly wear the white '*pekok*' with a white blouse and the men with a white shirt and dhoti. All those modification and changes were done just to differentiate with the Animistic Karbis.

3) Change of Marriage System

The traditional marriage system of the Karbi is called '*Adam Asar*'. It was a compulsion for the groom's family to take the '*bong*' gourd shell filled with '*horlang*' rice beer along with betel nut and leaf to honour the bride's father. Moreover, '*hor-arak*' (liquor) must also be given to the bride's family and relatives as an honour. Generally, '*hor-arak*' filled in a beer bottle is offered to the family and relatives of the bride. Those two items were important for the Animist Karbi, thus at the entrance gate of the marriage ceremony, in the middle of the word '*Adam*' and '*Asar*' the Animist Karbi put the symbol of '*bong*' gourd shell and a bottle of hor. The Karbis belonging to the new religious form or groups usually used the word '*Pangri-pangdon*' instead of '*Adam-Asar*'. Though the religious groups of Bhaktitom used the traditional '*bong*' in the marriage system, yet they never filled *horlang* in the '*bong*' instead a few grains of rice with holy basil and water is filled in the '*bong*', which is then used to honour the bride's father. The Lokhimon and others used clay lamp, ground rice, flowers, betel nut and leaf with a thali to honour the bride's father. The Christian Karbi used ground rice and

sugarcane cake with a '*Hotton*' (Karbi basket) to honour the bride's father. Regarding the symbol at the entrance gate, the Christian Karbi usually used the symbol of '*Hotton*' filled with a pack of ground rice and sugarcane cake. The Lokhimon uses the symbol of clay lamp in the entrance gate of a marriage ceremony. The Animist Karbi must conduct the ritual of '*Hemphu-Mukrang*' to seek the blessing of the newly wed couple, by sacrificing a red fowl. The Christian Karbis instead of conducting the ritual of '*Hemphu-Mukrang*' go to the church to seek the blessings of the newlywed couple. The Lokhimon Karbis usually do the marriage on a symbolic *Yagna* (a sanctified square piece of ground bounded at the corner by banana trunks) just like the mainstream Hindu wedding. A married woman of Lokhimon Karbi used to put the mark of '*sindur*' (vermilion) on their forehead. Such '*sindur*' is avoided by Christian and Animist Karbis, because putting a '*sindur*' on the forehead is a cultural taboo for the Animist Karbis.

4) Change of Rituals Offerings

In the ritual of Animist Karbis, the offerings were mainly done on earthen mound or altar and the offerings were mainly done with rice and rice powder, betel nut and leaf, gourd shell filled with rice beer, as well as by sacrificing an animal like fowl, hen, pigs and goats, etc. The Bhaktitom religion, though they also made an earthen altar or mound, but the offerings were done with fruits, flowers, clothes, gourd shell filled with rice grains, holy basil, and water, along with clay lamp and incense sticks. Similar is the case of other new religious form where the offerings were done with flowers and fruits. Animal sacrifice is forbidden by the new religious groups and for them the sacrifice of animals is a forbidden sin. Both men and women actively participate in the offerings or worships, which were totally opposite in a case of the traditional worships or rituals. In, the worships or rituals of Animist Karbi, it is a taboo for the women to enter the worship area.

5) Change of the Space for Worship

The Animist Karbis do not have any idols, temple or shrines, as for them, spirits are everywhere and thus their worships or rituals are held in the courtyard of a house, at the crossroads, a bank of a stream, paddy or any crop fields, etc. They

worship the spirits of each particular space or area called '*Longri Arnam*'. However, the worships of either Christian or Hindu Karbi were confined to either church or temples. Though the Bhaktitom religion, in terms of worship space, it is similar to Animist Karbi, yet their way of worships is different from the Animist Karbi. They worship both in the open space as well as in a temple. The Bhaktitom trust tried to make the idol or images of '*Sot Recho*' (a Karbi legendary social reformer, a Karbi king, and a god). The image was shown in their religious book called "*Sot Recho Karcho*" (lit. the worshipping of '*Sot Recho*') published in the year 2011 by the Karbi Bhaktitom Trust at KASA Stadium, Diphu. The images were art and painted by Mr. Deben Timung, Pilogri Arts, Diphu.

6J Salient Changes in the Animistic Religious Practices

Due to the impact of modernisation, prolonged contact with the Caste Hindu society and Christianity religion, some changes in the Animist Karbi religion can be noticed. Some of the changes noticed in the Animist Karbi religion as mentioned by the respondent were as follows:

1. Traditionally, the Karbis were not idol worshippers, however as told by the respondents, in the recent years some Animist Karbis started worshipping the images/portraits of *Hemphu-Mukrang-Rasinja*, which was introduced and circulated by Hemphu-Mukrang Adorbar (a Karbi traditional religious organisation) on 22nd of December, 2012, at Nambor Adarsha village in the presence of Mr. Lunse Timung (President Hemphu-Mukrang Adorbar) and Mr. Chandra Sing Kro (President of Karbi Cultural society, Karbi Anglong).
2. According to them, there is a greater impact of Hinduism on the Karbi. Due to the greater impact, a number of Karbi were following Hindu rituals. Moreover, some Animistic Karbis think that they were greater Hindus, thus they can definitely worship the Hindu gods and goddess along with the practices of their Animistic religion. Some Animist Karbi priest often puts the Sanskrit words while narrating religious verse like *Prabhu*, *Parmeshwar*, etc. Some often compare the Karbi deity with that of Hindu gods and goddess. For example, the Karbi goddess *Pithe Ningrepi* is compared with goddess Saraswati, Mukrang with Lord Shiva, *Rasinja* with goddess Laxmi, etc.
3. Shamanist practitioner among the Karbi is known as *Lodep* (male practitioner) and *Lodepi* (female practitioner). This shaman is a mystic healer who can communicate with the spiritual words. This shaman can diagnose the diseases of a person by communicating with the spiritual world. This practice among the Karbi, however, has almost vanished and the new concepts of '*arnam kardon*' (possession of various gods and goddesses) is quickly taking over the rural poor villagers of Karbi Anglong. In majority cases, such phenomena of '*arnam kardon*' is occurring in women and is mostly of possessing by the Hindu Goddess mainly *Durga*, *Saraswati*, *Laxmi*. Such phenomena were gradually increasing and gaining acceptance over the Karbi traditional belief system of animism, ancestor worship and shamanist practices.
4. As per the traditional rule, the Karbi priest must wear white dhoti and clothes while performing the ritual. However, due to modernisation some Karbi priests often wear Western dresses and demand different market based Western addictive items.
5. Earlier some ritual of the Karbi took three to four days to complete, but nowadays it is reduced to a day or two in order to avoid the time and cost. Some priests often reduced the lengthy religious verse, and some poor families often reduced materials requisite of the ritual, for example instead of three fowls to be a sacrifices, one or two fowl are used, and sometimes instead of a goat a fowl is sacrificed, as by doing so they can reduce the cost factor.
6. All the ritual verses of the Karbi were done orally since the Karbi do not have a written script. The priest earlier could able to remember the lengthy verse and could narrate it easily at any time. Nowadays with the spread of education, some of the literate persons or priests note down the religious verse and at the time of ritual they simply open the notes and thoroughly read it. Just like reading the Bible or Gita.

7. There is also a tradition where every Karbi household compulsorily performs a ritual called '*Sangkimi arnam kepi*' (offering of new rice to the gods/deities) at every new harvest, before the new rice or the other cultivated food items were formally consumed. Such an occasion is eagerly awaited by the household members, as they invite relatives and friends to be a part of '*an-kimi kecho*' (new rice eating). Nowadays among some of the urban poor and middle-class Karbi, with the change of occupation, as well as the low economy, mostly some of them have abandoned such practices.

CONCLUSION

The livelihood of the Karbis has nourished in the lap of nature. Different natural resources play a vital role in their material culture and sustenance. Accordingly, the Karbis used to worship different deities related to forest, stream, mountain, etc. In Karbi Anglong, they have a continuous interaction with the Hindu caste based Bengali and Assamese society. Gradually, some significant influence of Hindu rituals can be noticed among them. It has become more influential probably due to their agriculture-based occupation. Meanwhile, despite salient influence and practise of Hindu rituals among them, they are not interested to change their tribal identity and get merged into the Hindu caste hierarchy system. The concerned people who are the believers of emerging religious trends, always used to follow the age-old custom of clan exogamy and preferably tribal endogamy. It has been found that the Hindu caste based cultural tradition and Animistic beliefs have a parallel co-existence among them. It can be noted that by following certain Hindu traditions the Karbis are never compromising with their tribal identity and ethnic identity. A number of initiatives have

been taken by the district administration and civic cultural society to preserve their Animistic performances and traditional cultural practices.

REFERENCES

- Bey MS 2009. *The Karbi Belief*. Diphu: Karbi Lammet Amei.
- Bhattacharjee S 2015. Sacred groves in Karbi Anglong: An anthropological observation. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 68(1): 131-141.
- Boro Anil 2010. *Folk Literature of Bodos*. Guwahati: N. L. Publication.
- Bose NK 1953. *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays*. Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company.
- Das AK, Raha MK 1967. *The Rabhas of West Bengal*. Calcutta: Temple Press.
- Frazer JG 1922. *The Golden Bough*. London: MacMillan and Co. Limited.
- Geertz C 1973. Religion as a cultural system. In: C Geertz (Ed.): *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selective Essays*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 87-125.
- Ghurye GS 1950. *Caste and Race in India*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.
- Hanse HM 2007. Traditional Dwelling Process of Karbis. In: PC Patniak, D Borah (Eds.): *Tribes of India: Identity, Culture and Lore Special Focus on the Karbis of Assam*. Guwahati: Angik Prakashan, pp. 76-84.
- Lyall C 1908. *The Karbis*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication.
- Marriott M 1955. *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Phangcho PC 2003. *The Karbis of North-East India*. Guwahati: AngGik Prakashan.
- Redfield R 1941. *Folk Culture of Yucatan*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Redfield R 1955. *The Little Community: View Point from the Study of Human Whole*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Sinha S 1965. Tribe-caste and tribe-peasant continua in Central India. *Man in India*, 45(1): 57-83.
- Terang CK 2007. Festival and beliefs of the Karbi tribe. In: PC Patniak, D Borah (Eds.): *Tribes of India: Identity, Culture and Lore Special Focus on the Karbis of Assam*. Guwahati: Angik Prakashan, pp. 82-97.
- Teron D 2011. *The Karbi Studies*. Guwahati: Assam Book Hive.
- Tylor EB 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Customs*. London: John Murray.
- Vidyarthi LP, Rai BK 1985. *The Tribal Culture of India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Paper received for publication in March, 2020

Paper accepted for publication in September, 2020