

# **A STUDY OF MORTUARY PRACTICES OF PLAINS KARBIS OF ASSAM**

**Report prepared by**

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**Navakanta Barua Foundation  
Project funded by : Assam Institute of Research for  
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## PREFACE

The Assam Institute of Research for Tribals for Scheduled Castes , Guwahati has undertaken five Research Projects on various aspects of life and culture of the tribes of Assam under the aegis of the Ministry of tribal Affairs , Government of India during 2011-2012 and the present study entitled "A Study on the mortuary practices of the plains Karbis" was assigned to the Managing Trustee , Navakanta Barua Foundation , GUWAHATI . The Trustee has done a commendable job in preparing the report based on empirical research in time. The study pin pointed certain salient features of hitherto un-researched and lesser known plains Karbis , especially the ' Mortuary practices' . In spite of consideration assimilation process the ethnic group has been able to preserve most of the core of their culture in fact vis-à-vis the hill Karbis .

However , certain variations have been noticed regarding the mortuary rites . For instance the plains KARBIS has introduced Megalith (SILPOTA) culture in honour of the dead which is not found in the cremation and purification rites of the hill Karbis . Similarly the role of 'Uchepi' (professional weeper ) is absent among the plains Karbis

The researchers have incorporated the salient features of the socio-cultural life of the plains Karbis also .

I take this opportunity to thank Dr. UPALA BARUA , Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology Cotton College , Guwahati and Dr. Shabeena Yasmin Saikia ,Assistant Professor , U.G.C Academic Staff college , GUWHATI for taking much pains in visiting the plains KARBI villages in order to prepare an authentic presentation of the mortuary practices of the plains Karbis

**(G.C. KAKATI )**  
**I/c Director**  
**Assam Institute of Research for**  
**Tribals and Scheduled Castes,**  
**GUWAHATI-22**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

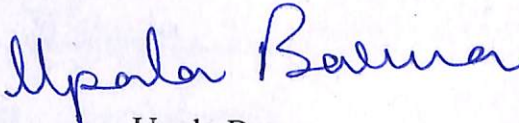
This study on the Mortuary practices of the Plains Karbis of Assam has grown out of the data accumulated from the field studies conducted by the NKB Foundation since 2005. It is in reality, a part of a larger ongoing project on some important ethnic communities who are adapting to changing situations . It is needless to say that Navakanta Barua, the doyen of modern Assamese literature was a humanist to the core of his heart. He had a great love and regard for all the tribal and ethnic communities of the world and their culture. That was the rationale behind taking up such a project.

However, due to financial constraints, the project could proceed at a very slow pace. We are therefore really grateful to Assam Institute of Research for Tribal and Scheduled Castes, Guwahati for agreeing to grant fund for the project. All the trustee and members of N.K.B.F acknowledge the assistance provided by the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Government. of Assam. Guwahati with the deep sense of gratitude.

We also acknowledge the initiative of Ms.Purabi Sonowal ACS one of our Trustees for her support and help.

We are also thankful to the people of the study villages for their enthusiastic cooperation and support during the entire process of data collection. Mr. Nabajyoti Hazarika had come forward with his support during the final stages of the study. We are grateful to him.

Finally, we acknowledge the help and support of Ms. Rami Baruah, Secretary ,NKB Foundation in completing the project.



Upala Barua  
Managing Trustee  
Navakanta Barua Foundation  
Guwahati : Assam

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1: Introduction:**

The practices connected with the disposal of the dead vary greatly from community to community. Sometimes even variations are observed in the same community depending on the geographical variation. As to the psychology of mortuary ritual, it frequently appears to involve an ambivalent attitude – on the one hand and attitude of fear and horror towards the corpse, coupled with a desire to dispose of it as completely as possible.

Human instinct and the wishes for remembrance compel us to provide ways for the dead to be acknowledged. As such a memorial service or funeral of some kind is almost essential for those who the deceased leave behind.

#### **1.2 :An Overview on Death**

Death is a broad and a complex issue. Varieties of disciplines have analyzed it from various angles and discussion on it could be traced back to time immemorial. Sociology and cultural anthropology have broad sub-fields under which death, social implications of death and the rites and rituals connected with the death are studied. Today in many countries a new discipline namely Mortuary Science is getting importance.

The fears and attitudes that people have towards death are not simply instinctive, but are learned expressions. Every culture has its own coherent explanation of death which is believed to be right by its members. People always have a general instinct to avoid death. It is commonly believed that death is the separation of soul from physical body. He who is born begins to die. He who dies begins to live. Birth and death are merely doors of entry and exit on the stage of this world. In reality no one comes, no one goes. *Brahman* or the External alone exists.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of death has undergone changes in terms of medical, legal and cultural aspects since the introduction of life support technologies in the middle of the 20th century. However, despite huge scientific advancements over the recent decades, it has not been able to formulate any specific and universal definition of death: In fact, in its attempt to redefine death, the concept of death appears to have become immersed in ever increasing vagueness and ambiguity.

### **1.3: Importance of rituals**

Importance of rituals is recognised all over the world and over time. Prehistory provides us with ample evidence about the role of rituals in preliterate societies. The vital events of life such as birth, marriages and deaths, etc, are always looked upon in every society as the handiwork of God or supernatural powers of deities and accordingly perform various rituals to propitiate these deities.

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<sup>1</sup> Sivananda, Sri Swami, Swami Shivanand in his book *What Becomes of the Soul After Death* 1972: 9



Ritual is defined as highly symbolic acts that confer transcendental significance and meaning on certain life events or experiences. Thus it is not habits or what are sometimes called *ritualized behaviours* "Rituals are acts of significance. In many rituals, that significance is shared within a group. But the definition of *ritual* proposed here allows the possibility of both collective and individual acts, as long as such acts give meaning to an event or experience. Rituals, then, are powerful vehicles. Rituals provide structure. They offer opportunity to contain and express emotion. Rituals allow a community to come together to witness and interpret an event." (Doka: 1984: 119-130)

Arnold Von Gennep (1960:21) described rituals as *liminal*, which means that rituals allow one to cross a threshold from one identity or status to another. For example, a marriage ritual affirms that individuals have a new status, affirming a new relationship. Another meaning is implied by the term. *Liminal* also implies that rituals touch people at the very threshold of consciousness, speaking to the conscious and unconscious simultaneously (Martin & Doka, 1999: 7). The significance of ritual, then, is both social and personal. Rituals however, are the implementation of belief. Says Harkovits. . "Not only must the rite itself be detailed with care, but the sanctions for it must also be probed. Why does one dancer wear red beads another white. What does it mean that all the participants in a ceremony have vertical streak painted in the centre of the forehead.... The observed fact, of itself tells us nothing, it is not until we learn the reasons for the observed behaviour that we begin to comprehend the ritual we record." (Hersokovits: 19, 229).

The rituals have significance in their own way. Ritual performances of the preliterate society are more significant in the sense that they are under transformation for various external forces. Such religious performances vary from society to society even among the same tribe. These deviations are not quite significant when considered within the society, but gradually it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the original form of the practice. It is because of this reason that anthropologists try to record the details of the rituals for the purpose of preservation and identify the actual form of the rituals in a particular society.

Ritual is the demonstration of religious belief through performance of specific acts by members of a society. It is possible to describe and analyse the observable activities that constitute rituals. Leach (1968) points out that rituals are aesthetic and communicative acts conveying messages about a society's value system to its members. The separate acts that together comprise a ritual are rites, and so ritual may be considered an aggregation or system of rites (Weitz, C.A, 1979: 559). Victor Turner emphasises that the notion of drama is inherent in ritual. "Both in its plot and its symbolism, a ritual is an epitome of the wider and spontaneous social process in which it is embodied and which ideally it controls" (1968: 273 -274).

Piddington ( 1950) is of the view that the symbolic significance of ritual is perhaps best revealed in mortuary ceremonials and particularly in the widespread occurrence of weeping , self mutilation and other violent expressions of grief on the part of mourners. Although in some cases such expressions are ceremonial and in most cases do not bear any relationship with the grief actually experienced. However in most societies it is a communal affair and people participate in it spontaneously. As Hertz (1960) says

morning behaviour as well as conception of death itself and status of the corpse and soul are social production. Mortuary practices address a number of social requirements. Among the most important, the dead person must be detached socially and then reintegrated as a non-living member of society. While doing so the social order is reconstituted. (Hertz, 1960, 27-86). Thus, to understand the internal forces that acts and reacts and finally modifies or reorients the social order we need to understand the connected rituals.

#### **1.4: The Research Issue**

The Karbis are a scheduled tribe in the plain and the hill district of Assam. They are widely scattered but mostly concentrated in the district of Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills, Kamrup, Nagaon and Sonitpur. Although their original abode is still being disputed about by scholars, majority of them opine that they migrated from South East Asia and began to settle in this part of Khasi and Jaintiya Hills and also on the banks of the Kapili and Kolong rivers.

Karbis are divided mainly into two sections - the plain Karbis and the Hill Karbis. From the point of view of habitation, the Karbis are divided into three groups namely Chinthong, Ronghang and Amri. Those who live in the plain district are mentioned as Dumrali. Fundamentally, the plains groups do not differ from each other and they should not be confused with clan. The plain Karbis are now more Hinduised and the impact of acculturation is more prominent amongst them except a few of them who follow Christianity. This section of Karbi is the most advanced section of the tribe and adopted the Hindu customs for all intents and purpose and due to the loss of their mother

tongue partly used to speak Assamese. The Karbis have a colourful culture like that of the other tribes of Assam

Most of the traditional Assamese cultural elements have found inroad into the culture of Karbis residing in the plains today although they have still retained many of their traditional practices related to religion and festivals. They celebrate all the festivals like Bihu, Lakhi Puja, Saraswati Puja as observed the Assamese people but in their distinctive ways. Except these, there are some other festivals performed and observed by the plain Karbis.

An attempt has been made in the present study to find out the festivals performed by the plain Karbis of Assam and their method of performing these festivals. The study is based mainly on the field study conducted in the village Hajongbori of Kamrup (Metropolitan) district.

### **1.5: Scope of the Present study**

The Karbis of plains offer certain interesting features so far as their culture is concerned. They offered us ample scope to study their social, cultural and religious life, which have been changing or on verge of change in many respects, from their original traditional form primarily due to their close contact with the neighbouring people. At the beginning of the study an attempt has been made to reconstruct an overall account of the Karbis of plains covering their colourful life festivals and rituals. They perform a numbers of festivals, and rituals. An attempt has also been made to study the feasts associated with each of such festivals and all the related aspects. There have also been changes that have taken place in their religious life too and as such while studying the mortuary practices also an attempt has been made to study their religion. The traditional Karbi religion represents a form of

animism, which has now been considerably influenced by the doctrines beliefs, and rituals of the neighbouring Hindus. They believe in multitude of benevolent and malevolent spirits. For them, these spirits have command over all natural phenomena and they also shape the destiny of man. They believe they can be appeased by sacrifice and worship, which are done in the form of festivals.

### **1.6: Research Methodology**

**a) Coverage:** The geographical coverage of this study is extended to two plains districts of Assam viz undivided Kamrup and Nagaon district. A total of 15 Karbi inhabited villages have been surveyed. The preliminary information about the villages was gathered from the Deputy Commissioner and Circles officers' land records staff. (List of villages is appended at Annexure-II) out of which 11 in Kamrup district and 4 in Nagaon district.

**b) Data Collection:** Study was mainly empirical study and basic findings rest on primary data only. Although an open ended questionnaire was utilised in the field yet the survey was mainly based on observation method and narratives. All observations were recorded in the field either visually or autographically and later noted down in details. During the fieldwork another method which helped amply was the case study method. Various cases were taken that give direction to the gradual changes in the practices.

**c). Data Analysis:** The data collected is mainly qualitative. The recorded Case studies have been analysed in the light of prevailing differences between the norms and the actual situations.

## 1.7: Implications

The ritual traditions of Karbis of plains on the whole is an oral tradition; there is no written manual containing the detailed ritual structure and their procedure. What happens, in the wake of secularisation, there was a tendency for abbreviation or complete omission of the elaborate life cycle rituals while emphasis was given on the reception, etc. In the process much of the essence and beauty of the ritual has been lost. While there are lots of literatures on the belief part of their religion –their deities, belief in the supernatural, souls, myths and folklore, literature on their rituals is almost nil. This justifies the reasons for urgency of documentation of their mortuary rituals.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### PLAINS KARBIS OF ASSAM: AN ACCOUNT

#### 2.1: Introduction: The Karbis

The Karbis constitute one of the most important ethnic groups of Assam. Formerly known as the *Mikirs*, the Karbis prefer to be called as the 'Arlengs' or hill dwellers. This is true only in case of the Karbis of the hills; the Karbis living in plains do not give much importance whether they are living in hills or in plains. The most important attempt to compile an account of the Karbis during the British rule was made by Edward Stack, (ref: Section 1.9.1) an Indian Civil Servant during the eighties of the nineteenth century. The monograph titled 'The Mikirs' was edited, arranged and supplemented by Sir Charles Lyall from the papers of late Edward Stack under the directive of the then British Lt. Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Sir Bamfylde Fuller's (1902-06) administration. This attempt at writing monograph for official purpose provided a pertinent and authentic introductory note on the people. The British took note of their existence but systematically neglected their development (Bhattacharya: 1997). Since the Independence of India, studies have been made on the hill Karbis by various scholars.

The Karbis are basically a hill tribe concentrating mainly in the Karbi-Anglong hill district, "between the Brahmaputra on the north, the Dhansiri valley on the east and the Kopili and Jamuna valley on the west and the south" (Lyall, 1908:2). However, they are now distributed over a wider area

covering both hills and plains from Sibsagar and Golaghat to Nagoan and Kamrup districts of Assam. They have settled in the plains and taken to plough cultivation in Nagoan and Kamrup (Lyll: 1908).

The Karbis belong to the Mongoloid group and linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group (Bordoloi, Preface: 1982). They are divided into four regional divisions, Chinthong, Ronghang, Amri and Dumarli showing some linguistic and cultural modifications of the common Karbi ethos. The Karbis are divided into five major clans called 'Kur', namely Terang, Timung, Enghee, Ingti and Teron. Each of these clans is divided into a number of sub-clans (Bordoloi, Thakur, Saikia 56:1987). These clans are exogamous and marriage within the clan is prohibited. Monogamy is the general rule and widow remarriage though rare is permissible. Cross-cousin marriage is the preferred type of marriage and 'the Karbis do not have the system of bride price' (Bordoloi, Thakur, Saikia, 1987:56). After marriage the wife continues to use the surname of her father while her children assume the surname of the father.

The Karbis follow the patriarchal system of family structure and the descent is traced through the father's line. The inheritance of both movable and immovable property after the death of the father is through the sons and not the daughters. If a man dies without any male issue, his nearest male relative inherits his property.

Karbis are basically animist, but elements of Hinduism have percolated into the religious lives of those living along the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. Although the Karbis speak their own Karbi dialect, they also have a working knowledge of Assamese, the language of the state of Assam.



## **2.2: The Karbis of Plains:**

Many anthropologists / ethnographers have while narrating the accounts of Karbis of the hills has casually made references about their plains counterpart. No effort or data could be found to ascertain as to whether the people referred to as plains Karbis are really plains section of the Karbi tribe or not or a faction of some other tribe. This is necessary to be ascertained in view of the fact that Assam is the house of innumerable tribes most of whom are categorised under the broad category of Bodo- Kachari. Let us first examine how far the tribe under study satisfies the necessary criteria for a tribe?

### **2.2.1: Tribal Characters:**

Usually the people commonly termed as plains Karbis, are found residing in segments of Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Nagaon and Kamrup districts. Many of their traits and culture pattern resemble their counterpart in hills e.g.

- They speak the same language as that of the hills Karbis with slight local variation here and there.
- Their proper nouns are similar.
- Their clans system is similar.
- Their clan characteristics, functions and names of the clans are similar.
- Their political institutions are similar although these are addressed differently.
- Basic characteristics of their language is similar,
- Their religious practices are similar and above all,
- Their festivals are similar with variations in names only.

These similarities were observed while conducting field study in rural Kamrup and Nagaon district in order to bring up the basic characteristics of

the social system of the Plain Karbis. During the fieldwork, ample information was gathered- some are contradictory to each other, some are mythological and some are valuable but never recorded before. This section is compiled only with those facts which are found more or less common to all the plain Karbis visited. From what have been gathered from the field study and the available data pertaining to the hill Karbis, leads to believe that both the tribe at some point of time lived together as one tribe and in course of time a section of them had to descend to the plains for some reasons and started their settled life in plains. The descension rather than ascension is most probable, as those living in plains still cultivate the nearby hills by slash and burn method, which perhaps they learnt while living in hills. There is therefore scope to believe that the tribe under study is of the same stock although with the passage of time large scale changes have taken place in their social, political and economic organisation and this study is made to assess these changes.

Beteille (1987: 63) in his essay on 'Tribe and Peasants' concluded analysing various definitions of "Tribe", that "There is thus no one way of defining a tribal society. Definitions may be either very broad and loose or very narrow and restricted. The former would apply not only to the tribes but in many ways also to the peasantry. The latter would exclude many societies which have been conventionally regarded as tribal."

Ghuriye (1963:19-20) is one of the earliest writers who examined the characteristics of tribes in his famous book *the scheduled Tribes*. His basic contention is that, tribes cannot be called the aboriginal, as we have no proof that they are the original inhabitants of India. He describes the tribal people as

the imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society and can be termed *backward Hindus*. Ghurye's contention was not based on any intensive studies of the tribal people of India and therefore has no acceptability at least not in the present case.

Naik (1968: 86) provided some criteria for a tribe. Among these, the least functional interdependence, economic backwardness, geographic isolation, common dialect, independent political organisation, absence of desire to change customary laws, etc. are the main attributes. It is true that some of the characteristics as mentioned by Naik are prevalent among the tribes – but not all of these factors are always present. Similar is the case with Bailey's (1957) definition or Sahlin's (1968) segmentary definition of tribe, which cannot comprehensively describe a tribe. Beteille (1987) opening up a discussion on the definition or characteristics of a tribe finally concluded it upon analysing his study on Oraons, Haimendorf's study on Raj Gonds of Adilabad and Bose's study on Mundas. Thus, his essay could not arrive at any comprehensive definition of tribe.

For this study, and also for the North East India's tribes, the closest definition could be the one as treated by the Anthropological Convention. (Beteille, 1987: 78) For them the tribe as a whole, completely organised society. Such a society is characterised by:

- i) a self perpetuating system having within its boundaries all the resources necessary for the continued maintenance of a particular mode of collective existence.
- ii) It is a whole culture.
- iii) Each tribe has its own territory to signify that they are politically autonomous.

- iv) It also has its own language or dialect to mark the distinctiveness of its culture.

The Constitution of India which specifies certain tribes as Scheduled tribes also has not provided any criteria or definition for considering a community as a tribe under the list of Scheduled Tribe. However, the criteria adopted for specifying communities as Scheduled tribe are i) traditional occupation of a definite geographical area, ii) distinctive culture which includes whole spectrum of tribal way of life, i.e. language, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, arts and crafts, etc., iii) primitive traits depicting occupational pattern, economy, etc and iv) lack of educational and economic development (Verma, 1990: 11).

Considering, the two sets of criteria discussed above for the purpose of the present study, we would find that the community under consideration fulfils the basic criteria for a tribe. These characteristics are discussed in detailed in the succeeding paragraphs, which would make it clear that they are in fact a tribe in transition.

Few studies have been made on the physical traits of the Karbis – both hills and plains. The most recent among them is the study conducted by Deb (1979) comparing the physical measurements of hill and plains Karbis. He conducted the study assuming the tribe in plains as Karbi and thereafter proceeded to compare the physical traits of both. His findings on somatometric measurements show no significant variation between the two sets of tribes. He took 39 somatometric measurements from which thirteen indices were derived. He concluded that out of the thirty nine metric characters, only in respect of 10, significant differences could be observed.

Similarly, out of the thirteen indices, only in respect of 5, the differences were found significant. From this he concluded that somatometric measurements do not show any significant variation. He observed that, between both hill and plains Karbis, 'B' blood group is more frequent than 'A'. In the frequency distribution of ABO blood group, the two sets of populations are similar. But in respect of some somatoscopic characters, such as, skin colour, eye fold, nasal depression, prognathism and chin form, both the sections differ significantly. Deb has not specifically explained as to what could be the reasons for such variations although he raised the issue of habitat and environment as the reasons. Deb's study, on the whole remained indeterminate in saying whether the samples he used belong to same stock of population or not. A comparative chart is presented below which would show that not much of difference could be observed between the hill Karbis and the Karbis of Plains.

**TABLE- 2.2.1: Comparative Measurements of Hill Karbis and Plain Karbis**

Measurements	Height			Head length	Head breadth	Cephalic index	Nasal index
	Average	Tallest	Shortest				
Waddel's (hill)	5.354	5.583	5.108	181mm	141mm	77.9	85.10
Deb (Hillman)	5.28	5.64	4.90	184.6	146.4	78.96	82.45
Deb (Plains Karbi)	5.25	5.63	4.89	203 mm	157 mm	78.35	80.43

From the above table, it is clear that the difference in measurements among the hill and plains Karbis in respect of their heights are not significant. The observed difference between Waddel's measurements of hill men and that of Deb's, could very well arise due to sampling fluctuation. But of course,

variation is notable in respect of head measurements and cephalic and nasal indexes. There is scope for further study on this count. Thus, from the point of view of the physical measurements, although it is yet to be ascertained whether plains Karbis belong to the same stock of population to which the hill Karbis belong, yet from the point of view of social customs and beliefs, this could be easily ascertained that they are fact, belong to the same stock of population.

### **2.2.2: The Origin:**

It is difficult to ascertain as to when and how this group of Karbis started their permanent settlement in this locality of Guwahati, which has been a known urban centre since 17<sup>th</sup> century AD. There are various stories in circulation about their migration to this area - most of which have no historical support. As they appear, Karbi settlements under study do not seem to be older than one and a half century. They talk about the king and queen of Beltola who was here since 17<sup>th</sup> century AD. First land settlement in Guwahati started in the year 1918. The land records prepared during that time bears proof that many among the Karbis were then landholders.

As per one theory, the Karbis proceeded towards east from the southwestern side of Assam i.e. Garo Hills region due to the torture meted out to them by the hostile Garos. They started their journey along the south bank of Brahmaputra and in the process got divided into several groups. Some of the groups reached various hilly terrains crossing Nagaon; but a few groups preferred to stay back in the plains. After moving round from place to place, they finally settled down in the foothills located at the outskirts of the town Guwahati. The present Karbis are the descendents of those groups. This

analogy is believable; but this does not give any evidence about the time of migration and final settlement. Moreover, most of the previous writers have attempted to establish that the migration of the Karbis to Karbi Anglong occurred from the North Cachar hills. Robinson (1841&1849 : 308-312) opined that they had settled along the Barail range of North Cachar hills; but they were driven out by the Angami Nagas and Kacharis of the area. This made them to enter the Jaintia hills region. Dalton (1872) also believed that the Karbis were driven out from the Tolarams country, which was located between Nagaon and Cachar from where they entered the Jaintia country. Lyall (1908: 4) determined that "The traditions of the race point to the Eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, bordering on the Kopili (or Kupli) river (where many still remain), as their original abode." Lyall's confirmation is based on the data available at his time. It is difficult to accept the territory he suggested as the original abode. The tribe reached the spot through Nagaon either from Cachar or from Garo hills region and finding it uninhabited by other tribes, settled down there. Nothing could be definitely told about their affinities with the Jaintias or the Khasi tribe presently in Meghalaya. The common cultural traits prominent among them could be acquired by the either tribe. As the Karbis are the most adoptive tribe who accepts the customs of other culture quickly and when finds it difficult to maintain abandon these, their possibility to acquire the traits is greater.

### **2.2.3: Village pattern**

In their domestic life, the Karbis in the plains are very much similar to that of their Hindu neighbours to whom they are closely allied. The houses are mainly thatched, one storied houses of which walls are made of reeds or bamboo strings. The houses are not built closely – and therefore the village

does not appear to be a compact one. Almost every village in plains are located at the foothills or hillocks except in Nagaon districts where few villages are located in close proximity to the tea gardens. In other villages, people earlier used to cultivate the hill lands frequently using slash and burn method (Jhum). But gradually, the system has been abandoned.

The Karbi settlements under study also present the same picture. Most of the villages are at the foothills and although now there is no trace of original shape, yet, looking at the original Karbi houses, it can be said well that initially the village had a pattern where people lived nearer to their paddy fields.

The Karbi concept of village is a simple one. Their village set-up has no impact of their clan system and neither separate plot is reserved for clans nor does their land holding pattern have any reflection on their village set-up. In every village, the individual land boundaries are perfectly defined as each such plot has corresponding land records. But the boundaries of unsettled lands are not perfectly defined and many villagers are in occupation of such lands. In the town areas villages like Japorigog, Hengerabari one can enter the village without actually knowing that he / she is entering a tribal locality. The houses continue to be built along the busy main road in the Japorigog and Hengerabari villages. As homestead land is falling short due to further construction or extension, new houses are being built leaving either no space or marginal spaces between two such buildings. In some cases, the plots of land are so small that the families do not even have a kitchen garden. In certain other cases, the adjacent plot is sold out and is owned by a non-Karbi, non-tribal Company official raising his/her own huge building. Within the



original compound, existence of two or three houses usually indicates that there are married sons. The sons, usually before marriage, start up their own separate residences. This is a recent phenomenon. Earlier, after marriage, if condition arises married sons get separated raising their own house either within the compound or in a separate plot. Now after the shortage of homestead land, the village scene presents a picture, which is gradually transforming into a slum locality especially in the Japorigog and Hengerabari.

Four other sites are generally common to all the villages studied are used as traditional public places i) village *Than*, – a sacred area where the village gods are believed to reside, ii) an open space around the *Than* which is usually chosen as the centre of the village. In this open space, the “*Khels*” meet and other important events take place. The third area is the *Sil Puta* area where the memorial stone monuments are erected and slabs are set-up to commemorate the dead. In this place it is believed that the souls of the dead takes rest. The fourth is the residence of the *Burha Bangthai*, who is the head of the traditional village council. His house, the courtyard and the *Borghor* which is the sacred room used for rituals and religious purposes, form spaces for community congregation, performance of community rituals and festivals and a place for the keeping of community’s sacred objects.

#### 2.2.4: Dwelling pattern

The housing pattern of the Karbi villages may be described as dispersed units. Like any other tribal communities, the Karbis of the plain also prefer to live in villages usually away from urban disturbances. Unfortunately, most of the Karbi settlements in plains in Assam are now either gradually coming closer to urban centres either due to extension of existing urban areas or are

already within the grip of urban areas like in Guwahati. This has great impact on the housing pattern of the plain Karbis. A typical Karbi house is made of bamboo and thatch. Most of the Karbi villages can be seen having gradually converted their houses from thatch roofed to tin roofed. Some such conversion has already been completed. In Guwahati, in almost all the target villages, houses are constructed with tins (CI sheets).

Usually the dwelling houses of Karbis consist of four rooms - one bedroom- *Ingkam* or "*Keahem*", one guest room or "*Aatsali*", a kitchen or *Ingkut* or *Pakahem* and a granary or *Raak* or *Maal hem*. In addition to these, cowshed or *Charangathali* and poultry house or *Waaral* or *Phakahem* is also seen at the back of the house. The main house where the head of the family resides is constructed on the east-west side of the courtyard maintaining its length in the eastern direction. This is traditional pattern. But in towns, the housing pattern is mostly influenced by their occupational pattern. Where rented house is the main income-earning source of a family, the main house finds less preference than the rented house. The rented houses are constructed in the front panel with an expectation to get more rent. The main house of each Karbi family is raised according to their economic ability. But the concept of minimum four-room structure has been kept intact in respect of the main house.

One of the rooms adjacent to kitchen is called the *Borghor* (or the big house to mean that significant importance is attached to it although the room may not be a big one). Karbis of plains erect a post made of *Xunaru* tree (*Cassia fistula*) in this room performing specified ritual on a specified day. This sacred post is called the *Nungpe-aarhi* (*Mudha Khuta*). This has become

a sacred symbol of the Karbis of Plains like that of the *Jambili Aathon* of the hill Karbis. Each and every Karbi family must have a *Borghor* and a *Nungpe-aarhi*. If any sons of a family set-up new separate residence and willing to set up a *Borghor*, the matter is to be put up in the village *Mel* for consent. If the prayer is accepted by the *Mel*, only then the *Mudha Khuta* and *Borghar* are built, otherwise they are to use their parental *Borghor*.

### 2.2.5: Livelihood:

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Karbis living in plains of Assam and majority of them are orthodox cultivators. They usually raise common crops but they also cultivate other crops and vegetables as mixed crops. *Aijong* is the main among the paddies cultivated, as its yield is higher than other types. In Nagaon, in different areas, they also grow sugarcane in sufficient quantities. There are instances, of practicing jhum cultivation where a hilly land is available for raising maize. They are basically subsistence cultivators and could not save anything from their produce.

In town areas, gradual shifting in the occupation from farm to non-farm sector has almost annihilated the primary sector. Local boys have not gone back to their ancestral paddy fields. As a result, abandoned paddy fields can be seen in rows - some of which have been sold out at lucrative prices. In urban localities, cash in return of labour is preferred than working in paddy fields. Young ones - who have not completed their schooling find opening in various small establishments like PCO operators' assistant, sales boy in grocery shops, bus handyman, etc. There are also instances of plains Karbi boys and girls having successfully completed higher and professional

education and engaged in various professions although their numbers are very few.

Domestication of animals is their traditional habit and it is still found among the town dwellers under study. Animal products provide a family their subsidiary incomes. Most of the plain Karbi families rear cow, goats, pigs, dogs, fowls, etc, which are the major domestic animals. Another subsidiary source of income is brewing rice beer which fetch a good income in the town market although till now remained a secret trade mostly ran by women.

#### **2.2.6: Food habits:**

Although racially diverse, the Karbis of plains are geographically very close to their neighbour – the Assamese people and thus have abundant influence on their cuisine. Food plays a central role in Karbi culture – in both hills and plains; it represents prosperity, generosity, and community support. Hospitality is extended to visitors, who are usually asked to share a meal. Even if a visitor is not hungry, he or she will generally eat a small amount of food so that the host is not disappointed. Food is also often given as a gift, and a refusal of food is considered an insult to the host or giver.

The manner of taking food and also food schedule varies from society. Similarly, type of food taken on various occasion is controlled by the ethics, norms and taboo of that society. The food taken on daily basis may not serve the purpose during a ceremonial occasion or a festival. In traditional societies, people strictly follow their food habits on all occasions. This is also observed among the plains Karbis. They are very sincere and devoted to their customs pertaining to food habits.

Rice in various forms is traditionally eaten by the Karbis living in plains. Their diet also includes various other cereals such as dal & fresh vegetables, fish and nuts. Fruits, fruit juices, vegetables, and nuts (e.g., peanuts, macadamia, and litchi) are eaten in abundance, while milk and other dairy products are not common. Coconuts and banana are plentiful.

Rice is the main item of food. From different varieties of rice, not only the two principal meals are prepared but also other preparations for breakfast and snacks viz., *muri*, *akhoi*, *chira* are also made. In rural areas, hundreds of species of fishes are available in the nearby Brahmaputra or Kolong river, local canals, streams, ponds, and beels. Rice and fish, therefore, figure prominently in the food habits of the Karbis of plains.

Karbis eat rice every day and at every meal. At daybreak an agriculturist or a fisherman starts his long day with a meal of *panta*, plain boiled rice soaked overnight in water and allowed to ferment a little. This watery rice, mixed with salt and chilli, makes a filling breakfast for the poor. *Muri* or, *cheera* (flattened rice) are some other items of a traditional breakfast in most Karbi homes. These items are taken with milk or yoghurt and seasonal fruits like mango, banana or jackfruit. They are also taken with *gur*, raw country sugar made of date juice, palm juice, or cane juice. A great variety of *pithas* (homemade cakes) is made of sweet rice (Bora rice), especially new rice harvested in the autumn.

Thus, for them, rice is the main food. It is taken with other subsidiaries such as vegetable curry, pulse curry fish meat and egg, *dal* and various other green vegetables. Usually they take food three times a day, i.e. morning, noon and night. However, there are also families who take meal twice a day. Some of them also take rice as their breakfast followed by plain tea. Apart from the

morning meal with *panta bhat* and dry or roasted fish sometimes biscuits and other light items such as bread, *roti*, *puri*, etc also taken these days. The morning breakfast has no hard and fast rule; it may be different for different members of the family.

Apart from the meals, the villagers also have a schedule for light refreshments. Usually in the afternoon, after coming from the jobs or paddy fields, they take red tea. This is a new habit. Sometimes the tea is taken with biscuits. Some of the male folks of the village throng the village *chowke* (crossroad) where a small tea stall is usually found. They sit there and discuss various matters till the night falls taking tea from time to time.

During the festive occasions, food occupies an important place. Every ritual or festivals have specified food and drink according to the availability of a particular food item. But the traditional likes and dislikes have now tended to disappear under economic pressure and several other factors. The consumption of rice beer is also gradually coming down due to the strict enforcement of the excise laws, which is a healthy sign for the socio-economic growth of the society.

The impact of urbanization on the plains Karbis in their food habit is enormous. In the villages under study, food habits have undergone drastic changes. Earlier they used to take rice prior to their leaving for paddy field, then again at noon time and finally in the evening; but now due to change in occupational pattern, their food intake has been reduced and they are now habituated in taking only two major meals a day – one in the afternoon and the other at night. This has necessitated making a provision for breakfast in their food schedule. Apart from this, their list of food items has also undergone

change with packed food making way to the list. They are now used to take different urban packed food like noodles as Chowmein, Maggi, roti, bread, etc.

### **2.2.7: Material Culture:**

Man wrests from his habitat by means of his technology, foodstuff, shelter, and clothing application for survival. The objects he makes and uses for these purposes are termed material culture. In short, the term material culture means all objects used for his survival or for supporting and improving his life.

The detailed study of all the aspects of material side of an individual life seems to be of great interest and importance not only from the intrinsic interest for the artifacts themselves, but for the source of new invention and techniques of manipulating the object. It has a close resemblance with the entire social organization and other religious and ceremonial practices.

Anthropologists on many occasions have warned that many items of material culture are fast disappearing without leaving a trace behind. More and more traditional artifacts and techniques are outmoded by accelerating technological changes. To study material culture, the study of ecology is very much important as an interrelation between ecology and material culture. Man's material culture is a product of technology, which comprises of tools and implements, weapons, cookery, drum and ornaments, houses, etc.

The plain Karbis use several forms and types of material culture items, like any other community. These material cultural items are also decorated with various designs. In the following table some of such items are outlined.

**Table: 2.2.7: Material Culture Items of the Karbis of Plains**

Name of Items	Materials used	Description
Polo	Bamboo	A kind of basket trap, used for fishing purpose. In shallow water this is used.
Been	Bamboo	Kind of basket, and to keep fish, while fishing
Laan	Thread and iron balls	A net used for fishing in larger water
Jakhoi	Bamboo	Fishing implement, this is narrowed down at both ends having its entrance at the middle.
Mukhura	Bamboo	Used as a barrier or covering.
Luhi	Bamboo	Fishing element.
Choroh	Bamboo	Acts as a kettle where the rice bear is filtered after preparation
Ingkrung	Bamboo	A round shaped implement with square holes to let the rice dust out.
Baleng	Bamboo	Round shaped rice cleaning implement.
Duli	Bamboo	Big squared basket to keep grains of rice.
Paching	Bamboo	Baskets to keep daily and things.
Lang	Wood	Used for pounding rice or paddy.
Hap	Bamboo	Measuring rice a small basket.
Ho	Bamboo	Used for weighting rice.
Khaksili	Bamboo	Used for scattering and spreading out paddy.
Hak	Bamboo	Basket used for carrying all the belonging at the time of marriage.
Mujurah	Clay	Large earthen vessel used for keeping rice bear.
Dhengki	Wood	Used for husking and pounding grains.
Harpong	Bamboo	Like a glass used in serving rice bear to the guest.
Harbong	Skin of dried guard	Used for storing rice bear.



Chi	Bamboo	Used for filtering rice bear.
Inghol	Bamboo/wood	Used for sitting purpose.
Taar	Bamboo	Used for drying grain.
Hijap	Bamboo	A hand made fan.
Khangra	Bamboo	A cage-like to keep fowls.
Janga	Bamboo	Bamboo vessel where the rice beer is filtered.
Konchor	Bamboo	Rice is stored here
Baclangsiri	Bamboo	Conical shaped basket where the acid 'Pholo' get filtered.
Chacha	Bamboo	Fishing implement with spitted mouth end to catch fish.
Hilai	Iron	Traditional gun used for hunting.
Tatakan	Iron and Bamboo	Flat, sharp, pointed and poisonous hunting implement.
Nokpak	Iron and Bamboo	Sharp and heavy Dao used for sacrificing animal.
Kuh	Iron and Bamboo	Kind of hoe, common agricultural implement.
Nokchok	Iron and Bamboo	Sharp implement used for cutting vegetables, betel-nut etc.
Arkengketokalong	Iron and wood	Used for grinding betel nut and betel leaf.
Choaghai	Iron and wood	Used for cutting and chopping wood of big tree.
Noh	Iron and wood	Sword.
Kareik	Clay	Kind of earthen vessel used in pouring rice beer to the deities worshipped.
Saamlohar	Wood	Used in serving vegetable or meat curry.
Aamlohar	Wood	Used in serving rice.

Making of these items are the favourite past time of the aged persons of the Karbis. They do not make these items for commercial use – but for their own household use only although they know that these are in great demand and they can prepare these in large scale.

In the villages under study, most of the items listed above are bought from the markets, which are easily available and also cheap. Families having an aged person still enjoy using few of such items of their own make.

#### **2.2.8: Clan Organisation:**

Like that of the hill Karbis, the plain Karbis also have several groups, which they call *Ghar* or *Gharia* or sometimes *Kur*-as used by hill Karbis or sometime *Faids* as used by the Assamese. They have classified themselves broadly into five groups or *Gharias* - these are Terang (or Terang gharia or Terang faid) Teron (or Teron Gharia), Ingti, Inghi, and Timung. Each of these five clans has many sub-clans. While Inghi and Timung have 30 sub-clans each, Terang and Teron have 6 sub-clans each and the remaining clan Ingti has only 4 sub-clans. They follow the patriarchal system of family structure and the line of descent is traced through the male members only. Thus, every Karbi must belong to the clan of his or her father. The clan members are believed to have descended from the common ancestor.

These clans are completely exogamous and marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can never take place since the children of the same clan are considered as brothers and sisters. Such happening is considered as the greatest offence. It amounts to incestuous union between the brothers and sisters and the prescribed punishment for such an offence is excommunication from the community. The punishment is awarded by the *Mel*. In such cases, the parents of the wrong doer also suffer indignities. They are considered as polluted and can be taken back to the fold after performing the ritual and giving a feast. Such things happen very rarely.

The clan differentiation could be visible only in respect of the life cycle rituals. Otherwise clan feeling is not so prominent among the plain Karbis of Guwahati. Even in the cremation ground called *Smasan* or *Thiri*, no such area is kept demarcated for each clan among the plain Karbis as can be viewed in case of the hill Karbis. Although, all the five clans are socially placed on the basis of equality, *Ingti*, being a priestly clan is supposed to have a higher status in earlier times while it is also a fact that the clan having majority of the population in the village enjoys a dominant status. The clan system also plays an important role during the death rituals and mortuary practices.

Every clan has their own Puja, which they popularly call *Faidor Puja*. In these clan performances, all the clan members from all neighbouring villages are supposed to be present. They select a village for observing the Puja and usually such a village is chosen where the clan has considerable numerical strength. This is for no competitive reasons but for obtaining the best assistance possible. The *Rongsongs* observes the "*Chutal Puja*" in every 3-5 years in Jagiroad in the month of Bohag, which is actually Johong puja where the *Durga-asur* is worshipped. Most of them are vague about the god they worship as they all try to equate their Karbi gods with that of the Hindu god *Mahadev/Siva*. The *Bungrungs* perform the Johong puja near Narengi. The *Tumung* performs in Dholboma in the residence of the Clan "Ata". The *Terangs* are not sure. Each community/*Khel* which is a socio-political functional unit also observes this puja at their *Khel* level. This comprises a reaffirmation of affiliation and solidarity within the various reference groups.

### 2.2.9: Social Life and Institution

The social life of the Karbis living in plains is simple and based on honesty and adherence to social norms. Like the Karbis of the hills, Karbis of

the plains also follow the patriarchal norms in their society. Marriage within the clan is prohibited and property is transmitted through the father's line. Mothers' movable items are shared between the daughters.

**a) Family structure:**

Plains Karbi clans, as discussed above are although kinship categories, they do not form any compact residential units. The household units, among the plain Karbis, are the families and they are also the smallest residential units in their social system. Patriarchal social system is dominant among the plains Karbis. Male member is the head of the family and he gives the final decision on every matter.

The common family norm for them is a nuclear family consisting of father, mother and unmarried children, having a common hearth. In the study area however, various types of joint family system is observed, though few and such families remained more or less stable till they were pursuing agriculture as their main occupation. Shortage of agricultural labour and homestead land happen to be the main reason for raising separate residential units and thus for this deviation.

The father is considered the head of the unit like in any other patriarchal society. Traditionally, the females take charge of the domestic chores and are entrusted with the family treasure. Males leave home and take part in different external activities whereas females are confined within the walls of home. This tradition has now not been followed strictly even in rural areas. Except in the interior areas of Nagaon and Sonitpur, plains Karbi women in urban and semi urban localities are now taking part in the

supplementing family income by taking paid jobs and self employing mechanism. There is a tradition of respecting old people and women among the Karbis. Males have been playing a dominant role in raising educational awareness among their people. Women are given much importance and without the consent of the woman no marriage takes place.

Apart from the nuclear families, they also have larger family units which include other kins – who are agnatic and rarely affinal. Although among the Karbis, such joint family system is not very common, yet it was prevalent among them in the past due to the lack of alternative sources of income except agriculture. In the nuclear families, after the marriage of the son, he brings his wife to live in the parental residence. This is how a joint family starts. In the study area, such joint families are not very stable. Usually the death of the father or the marriage of the second brother terminates the 'jointness' of the family.

In the earlier days agriculture was the main source of living and father being the head of the family all the immovable properties are put in the name of the father. The rule of inheritance suggests that without the consent of the father not a portion of immovable properties can be transferred to the name of the sons during the lifetime of the father. This is one reason why the families remain united till the property is divided. But these conditions now no longer exist. Due to the increase in population and the availability of alternative sources of income, people desire freedom from the cares and responsibilities of joint family. Moreover, immovable properties are also shrinking in areas with the passage of time either due to the transfer by sale or due to fragmented holdings. Apart from these, individualistic thinking is also one reason for the

change. A tendency to live separately after marriage has developed and they are moving toward nuclear family structure. The people of new generation do not like to adhere to the norms and values of the joint family structure.

**(b) Karbi marriage:**

For the Karbis of plains, marriage is an important life time event and they attach great significant to it. Marriage is also a moment of great rejoice. As stated earlier, marriage is regulated by the prevailing exogamy rules of clan system, which are imposed by the village *Khels*. It is not necessary that in marriage village endogamy should be maintained. In marriage by negotiation they travel quite a far to bring qualified girls home so as to make a successful family life. There are also instances where girls from Nagaon are married to boys of Hengerabari or Moina Khurung. Therefore, distance traveled for marriage is not always significant in the Karbi society.

**Age at marriage**

Child marriage is not prevalent among the Karbis. Girls are considered very important in the family and without their consent no marriage takes place. Even when a person elopes another person's wife, such wife is formally asked whether she likes to continue with the earlier marriage. Her negative answer leads to dissolution of the earlier marriage. It is due to importance of girls in the family that age at marriage for girls is high. They prefer 20+ age as marriageable age for girls and most of the marriages take place between the age 24 and 28. For the boys also similar age group is preferred but boys enter into marriage contract once they start earning.

## Types of marriage

The Karbi marriage system is complex but interesting. They talk about two types of marriages – 1) arranged marriage/marriage by negotiation marriage, and 2) marriage by kidnapping or marriage by elopement. The latter two types of marriage can also be converted to arranged marriage if the *Mel* so orders. Arranged marriages are of two types. (a) *Dangor* or *Bor-biya*, (b) *sewa choron biya / siyachoron biya*, and (c) secret or confidential marriage performed in the presence of close relatives that is why it is also called '*bapek make dekha raije nedekha biya*' i.e. the marriage held before the parents but remains secret for the villagers.

### c) Political life:

The political structure of the plains Karbi society shares the features of both traditional and modern elements. They are today at least part of three administrative agencies in addition to their traditional administrative set up. These agencies are the local police, local revenue authority and urban local body.

In rural areas, a Government appointed *Gaon burha* is made responsible for reporting all-important happenings in the village. This village headman covers several adjacent villages. As such, he may not be a Karbi also. But he earns a prestigious place in the Karbi society although with this capacity as *Gaon Burha* he is not allowed to decide any social matters.

### *Khel* system & the *Mel*

The main body of the village political unit of the karibis of plains is called *Khel*. This is another important organisation in the social life of the

plain Karbis. The system provides that members of each of the villages must be a member of a *Khel*. Each village has one prominent *khel* and usually the villagers are members of that *khel*. But some villagers may also opt out from their own village *khel* and join the *khel* of another village. The *khel* organisation plays an important role in the day-to-day life of the plains Karbis. In the life cycle events, it is the *khel* that takes care of the whole proceedings. In case of the death of a person, persons from the deceased's *khel* must arrive and then only the proceedings start. This is true even when the deceased belong to a *khel* of a distant village. Thus *khel* system is a very strong organisation among the Plains Karbis and its role is almost like a clan.

Each *khel* has a small council, which is similar like the executive body of a political unit. This small council comprises of five to six persons and this number varies from village to village. The council is headed by the *Bangthai* – or the village priest. He is assisted by a *Riso Bangthai (Bisar Dhara)*, *Talukder*, a *Kotowal*, *Oklengsar* and a *Bharali*, etc. These posts are named differently in different villages. Each village has a traditional headman called *Bangthai* appointed by the elderly people of the village. All the village disputes are settled in the village through social norms. The dispute may be either very grave or of serious nature and any person who is at fault is inflicted with punishment according to the gravity of the offence made. A Court, commonly known as *Burha Mel* is called to settle such disputes which sits in a common place usually in the *Than*. This *Mel* in a sense exercises customary judicial power where the person committing any offence is compelled to take oath in front of the *Mel* and say the truth. *Burha Bangthai* usually presides over the *Mel*. Apart from the interested parties, other villagers who wish may remain present in the *Mel*. The decision of the *Mel* is final. The punishment is inflicted in the form of fine, etc. Apart from the settlement of disputes, the *Mel*



also decides about the performing of various festivals in the village and modifies rules. There is also another *Mel* called the *Deka Mel*.

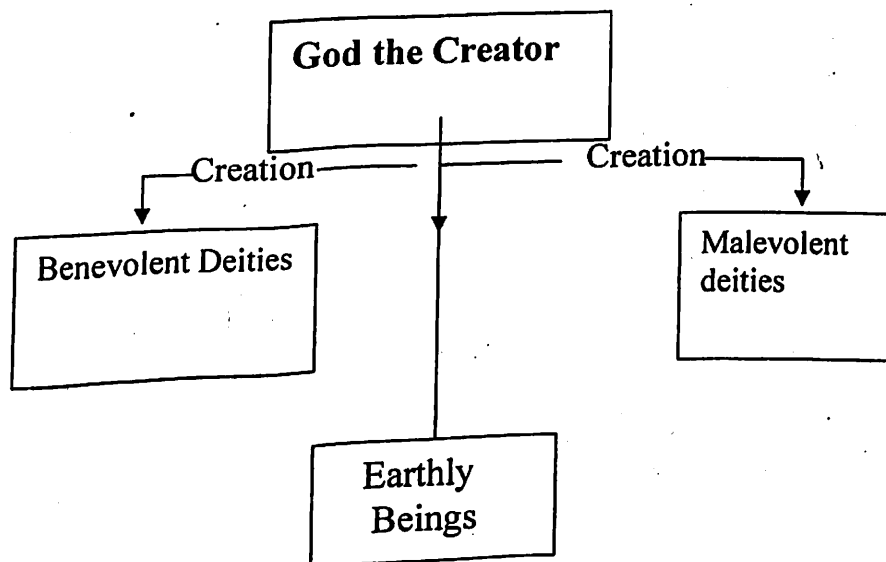
The system of bachelors' dormitory (*Dekachang*) is absent in case of Karbis of plains although the hill karbis maintain this system. But the Karbis of plains have youth clubs which they consider as the institution of social work. It performs social services for the village in general and families in particular as and when such occasions arise. The members do not claim any monetary remuneration from the concerned family for the services rendered. For the invalids, destitute and widows and the poorest of the poor in the village, the services rendered by this institution can be considered as a boon.

**d) The Grain Bank:**

The grain bank is a notable institution among the Karbis run under the patronage of traditional political unit. They call this grain bank the "*Rongkaching dam*". Three types of grain *dams* are found to be prevalent among them. They are *Kaceirok*, *Bhagiya* and *Lamkiradun*. The needy families irrespective of their social status are given paddy or land to cultivate on loan basis which must be returned after harvesting is done. The primary objective of the grain bank is to teach people to help themselves and create a feeling of fraternity and brotherhood among the youths and divert their minds towards social works for the betterment of their village. In the urban villages under study however no grain banks are maintained now a day as farm sector is almost absent today in their economy.

### 2.2.10: Religious beliefs:

From the point of view of religion, the plain Karbis can be regarded as animists. Hinduism in its crude form finds manifestation in their worshipping of Gods, Goddesses and Deities. In their own way, they believe in the concepts of immortality of soul, life hereafter and reincarnation. They believe the God as the creator of this universe along with the innumerable deities, some of whom are considered to be benevolent and some malevolent. Each disease is associated with a presiding deity. In their belief system God occupies the supreme position as shown in the sketch below:



For the appeasement of deities, the plains Karbis observe many religious rituals throughout the year when the sacrifice of pigs and fowls and use of rice bear are indispensable. They also believe in witchcraft and magic. That the basis of their religious philosophy is mainly based on animism cannot be denied even today, though under the influence of Hinduism a considerable number of plain Karbis have already assimilated with the neighbouring Hindu culture and have begun to take part in all religious festivals like *Durga Puja*,

*Lakhi Puja*, etc. From this point of view, this section of the tribe may be described as the followers of both saktism and saivism.

In the following paragraph a brief sketch of some Karbi religious practices have been discussed. The spiritual side of life pervaded every facet of daily living. Rituals are very often performed for even the most mundane tasks like cleaning the pigpen. Omens are constantly watched for, especially before long journeys or the start of important enterprises. They also practice blood sacrifice – usually of hen, or boar, but more common are bloodless offerings like the betel quid, or common gourd with prayers, supplication, praises, etc. The vegetable offerings are usually allowed to perish naturally. The Karbis of plains have “temples” known as the *than*. The structure of the temple, in most cases, is found to be temporary and usually small structures, but with enough open spaces for great feasts involving the whole village. The megalithic tradition is still in vogue among the plains Karbis.

Divination is very common. They resort to divination to ascertain the will of the gods, or the winds of fate. Male priests conduct divination by breaking eggs, observing liver of sacrificed pigs, hens etc. Their festivals could range from festivity rites, in which offerings are made and dances are performed in the fields; to rituals for good health, in which the community go for a sacred bath in the river where they would often sprinkle themselves with bundles of sacred herbs dipped in the river. The possibilities for such festivals are endless, and this feature of Karbi society has been carried on since long past.

### **2.2.11: Languages and Literature:**

So far as the Karbi language is concerned, it belongs to the great family of Indo-Chinese speech called Tibeto-Burman. Grierson’s Linguistic survey of

India places it in the Naga-Boro sub group. It has also definite affinity with the Kuki- Chin group of languages. Moreover, fairly large numbers of words, mostly of Assamese and some of Khasi origin have been permanently assimilated into the Karbi language.

It must also be pointed out that there are considerable differences between the speech of the people living in the hills and those in the plains. An interesting feature of the language is that there are many words or expressions, which are used, only in literary, particularly poetic compositions and not in ordinary speech. Language is a part of culture. The plains Karbis speak their own dialect but when communicating with other people they speak in Assamese language. They do not have their script but are rich in oral literature; the Plains Karbi language has some distinctive feature of its own.

#### **2.2.12: Festivals of the Plains Karbis**

Karbis of plains celebrate various festivals some of which are traditional and some are acquired due to close contact with their neighbouring Assamese communities. All three *Bihus* are celebrated by them with enthusiasm. They also celebrate *Na khuwa* and various pujas like, *Durga puja*, *Lakshmi*, *Ganesh*, etc. all in their own way. Few important festivals are discussed below in brief.

##### **a) Johong Puja**

On the first day of the month of *Bohag* and alongside *Bihu*, this *Puja* is performed to supplicate their local god *Johong* associated with agriculture, praying for a good agricultural year. As the season of spring connotes the beginning of the agricultural cycle and thus of a new year, it becomes

important that the wellbeing of all is ensured for the entire year. Thus *Johong puja* is observed communally at the *Burha Bangthai*'s place. The puja begins with the making of a platform on the ground in the name of the god *Johong*. Plantain leaves are laid upon this platform with offerings of mango, jackfruit, sugarcane, banana, puffed rice, "hor", i.e. local rice beer stored in a gourd pot known as 'horbong' and flowers. The paraphernalia is arranged and spells are chanted by the *Kathar* or *Bangthai*. Thereafter the *Burha Bangthai* sacrifices the fowls in the name of the god *Johong*. The sacrifice is made in such a way that the blood of the sacrificed fowls spills over the plantain leaf and the offerings thereupon. The fowls are contributed by the people. Divination follows the sacrifice where the diviner, the *Kathar*, predicts the forthcoming year observing the nature of the intestine of the sacrificed fowls. These are later on cooked and offered to the people gathered around. But the main feast ensues the following day in the *Bangthai*'s house where the local people contribute the goats that are feasted upon amidst the rejoice of consuming 'hor'. The lead is taken by the *Kathar* and the *Burha Bangthai* in ensuring the wellbeing of the community and every household contributes to the feast. The performance of this puja, the celebrations therein and the *Bihu* has become an integrated festival for the Karbis pf Plains. It marks an important transition of nature through seasons and thereby of the entire community and hence its observance and arrangement is planned well in advance in the *Khel* that gathers in the month of 'Puh' (December-January).

#### **b) Ai Gossain Puja**

It is performed communally by the people on one Tuesday of the month of *Bohag* as decided earlier in the *Khel*. This is also a propitiatory form of *puja* wherein the *Ai Gossani* or *Ai Gossain*, i.e. the supernatural diety for pox

and measles is worshipped and entreated to protect their 'village' from this disease. It is performed in the *Than* officiated by the *Ai Paloni*, a lady expert in this puja. Banana bark in the shape of a boat is made and therein offering to the goddess in the form of betel leaves, areca nut are laid which thereafter are set afloat in the nearby stream. No animal sacrifice is made. Rather a pair of pigeons is set free and 'prasaad' of pulses and grams are distributed among the people.

This puja is also performed when anyone suffers from measles or pox seeking immediate supernatural redressal.

### c) Bhel Puja

In the month of *Jeth* (May – June), normally on the first Tuesday is the day for communal observance of the *Bhel puja* in the *than*. It is also performed to supplicate the gods associated with agriculture so as to avert any misfortune that might befall them more especially through a failure of harvest and so on. The puja is so called as it involves the making of a 'bhel' or raft of banana stalk to be set afloat in the water and it is devoid of animal sacrifice.

The preparation starts with the making of two small raised platforms in the *Than* at right angles to each other. Nearby one such platform is placed the 'bhel' whereupon areca nuts, betel leaves, 'ezaru' and 'sonaru' flowers are placed along with vermilion, a lighted earthen lamp and incense sticks. Over the platform, pairs of plantain leaves are placed each in the name of the gods and goddess associated with agriculture with offerings of betel leaves, areca nuts, banana and pieces of sugarcane stalks. After the ensuing ritual the people proceed to the local stream where the 'bhel' is set afloat in the stream as an

offering to the gods. This *puja* is conducted by the *Burha Bangthai* who then gives a feast to the village folks in his house and at his own expense. A sense of ensured wellbeing for the year ahead for the entire community accompanied by merriment and feasting marks this festival.

#### d) Dehal Puja/ Deohal/ Deoxal puja

This is the festival of utmost importance in the life of the Karbis of plains. It assumes great importance in their social life and is celebrated in a grand way both at the level of their locality as well as participants at the level of the Karbis of the Plains, which is held at a predetermined place. The *Dehal Rongker puja* as it is called is held for the entire community of plains Karbi on the first Tuesday of Phagun (February-March). Accordingly, each 'village' *Khel* decides upon the date of their celebration of *Dehal puja* within the next three days of the main celebration so as to enable the people of each *Khel* to participate in the centrally performed *Dehal Rongker puja*, which is associated with a fair. In the *Khel* meeting held especially to arrange for the performance of *Dehal puja*, money to be collected from each household is decided and responsibilities entrusted. Each household is to contribute a fowl or pigeon for this occasion.

At the level of their *khel*, the puja is held communally at the local *Than* to supplicate the numerous Karbi gods and goddesses as *Tamolong, Bolia, Kuber, Samon, Duwari* and all the spirits and supernatural entities which they traditionally believed to influence their lives. It is participated by all.

The *Dehal Puja* is conducted by the *Burha Bangthai* of the *Khel*. The *Riso Bangthai* is entrusted with the responsibility over the girls at *Dehal puja*.

## Festivals related to Life Cycle of Individuals

### e) Nari Kata Suwa

This is a kind of purificatory ritual / *Parachit* whereby the ritual impurity of child birth that extends to the mother, the new born and also the delivery room is removed and all the three entities thereafter become purged of the impurities which puts restraint on the normal affairs.

*Nari Kata Suwa* is preceded by the *Daini puja* performed for the welfare of the new born by thwarting off the evil eye from harming the newborn. The supernatural entity is *Daini* who, it is believed, if desires might cast her evil eye on the newborn or even protect from all evil forces. Thus, it becomes imperative that the Spirit be propitiated through worship. It is performed by the *Kathar* (Karbi priest). The *puja* starts with the installation of the image of '*Daini*' in the delivery room. Spells are chanted and she is requested to thwart off evil on befalling upon the newborn baby. At the same time a black bird which is believed to possess mystic powers against evil forces is sacrificed as offering to '*Daini*'.

This is soon followed by the *Nari Kata Suwa* ceremony observed in the same delivery room and by the *Kathar*. The paraphernalia includes the laying of a banana leaf in one corner of the room whereupon powdered rice and a lighted earthen lamp is duly placed with the *Kathar* then breaking an egg over this offering while chanting mantras to remove the '*Suwa*' (impurity) from room, the mother and the baby. Guests are invited to a feast over *horlung* to rejoice the occasion.



### 2.2.13: Death Ritual: Cremation of the Deceased

The death of a member of the community is considered as a grave occasion and symbolizes a social loss to the community. Besides the dead who are believed to live in their after life existence needs to be assisted by the living in this transition of status.

The dead is cremated. Before proceeding to the crematory ground known as "*Longdang*" situated just outside the village, the dead is laid in the household verandah while the kith and kins gather to mourn their loss and participate in the cremation ritual. In the *Longdang* the dead is placed on a pyre and the son or other male kin lits the pyre. The death ritual is discussed in the third Chapter in detail.

#### a) Rituals of Purification:

The Karbis have well defined purification system. Purification is done as per the direction of the *Mel*. Various types of purifications are briefly described below:

1. **Berkilut** (*Lut* meaning flowing water, *Ber* meaning on the body of the person): It is the highest form and necessary to take up in the matter of grievous offence such as, i) Clan endogamy, ii) Marriage with Muslims and Christians. This also necessitates according to some a *Baro Gram* sitting, iii) Hitting a cow with a weapon, iv) Hitting a person of different religion.

2. **Abangkialut**: It is a milder form meant only for milder offences as marriage with Hindu non-Karbis where the body of the couple is cleansed.

**3. Hemsibangthir:** This is the cleansing of the house. It is mandatory also in marriage with a Hindu non-Karbi.

**4. Abansibangthir :** It is a regular cleansing of the body for every member of the village on various occasions.

Thus through the concept of *suwa* of various types the plain Karbis delineate the abnormal sphere from the normal and the observance of the *porachit* as a mechanism for a smooth re-admittance to the normal sphere.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF FUNERAL TRADITIONS OF PLAINS KARBIS.

#### 3.1: Death Rituals:

Death rituals are as old as the civilization itself. Archaeologists have discovered burial grounds of Neanderthal man dating back to 60,000 BC with animal antlers on the body and flower fragments next to the corpse indicating some type of ritual and gifts of remembrance. Every culture and civilization attends to the proper care of their dead. An analysis of the this stage of life cycle presents three common features, 1) some type of funeral rites, rituals, and ceremonies, 2) A sacred place for the dead and 3) Memorialisation of the dead.

Funeral infers the post death activities performed by a family that may include any type of meaningful ceremony to commemorate the life of the deceased. There are controversies leading to the basic objectives of funerals. A seven-point list is prepared by Curtis D.Rosted, (2002) which indicates that:

- A funeral helps confirm the reality and finality of death.
- Provides a climate of mourning and the expression of grief.
- Allows the sorrows of one to become the sorrows of all.
- Is the only time when love is given and not expected in return.
- Is a vehicle for the community to pay its respects?
- Encourages the affirmation of religious faith.

- Is a declaration that a life has been lived, as well as a sociological statement that a death has occurred.

For Gluckmann (1937: 1) mortuary customs impose on the survivors not only certain modes of behaviour but also the simulation of certain emotions, which may or may not be felt. Redcliff Brown while talking about mortuary customs makes it clear that the mortuary customs as modes of social behaviour are concerned not with the dead man's own individual personality or his personal relations with his survivors. They deal with his social personality, the ideal position which he occupied in the society (1950:47). Following Tylor, those who regard the contents of the rites and beliefs and observances as the primary phenomena of ancestor worship necessarily seek to interpret it as a product of eschatological ideas and of doctrines about souls and spirits. Others follow Malinowski (1925, ch. III) and seek an explanation in the need for emotional reassurance against the loss and against the dread of annihilation

The mortuary practices of the Karbis - a tribe of Assam living in the hill district of Karbi Anglong are very widely known today because of the elaborate performances. They call it "*Chamangkan*". But the Karbis living in plains perform a notably different function which they call "Doha" or "sradha" like that of their neighbouring Assamese community. Different Survey and analysis show that mortuary practices of the Karbis of plains vary significantly from that of the hill karbis in respect of the rites and rituals. Moreover, one significant point of difference is that hill karbis do not erect megaliths in memory of the deceased during the performance of death ritual but erection of megalith constitute a significant part of the ritual of karbis of plains.. Burials of this community takes place in discrete cemeteries. The

present study is an attempt to record the mortuary practices of the Karbis living in plains in detail.

During the course of field survey the following 15 villages were examined. In all these villages the practices were observed and thereafter cases were recorded. The family members of the deceased and the village elders were personally interviewed for obtaining detailed information and explanations.

To record a complete account of their rites, necessitated witnessing of many funeral rites, in several villages as the custom differs at the death of different persons, depending upon age, sex, and social standing. To obtain their explanations and nature of superstitions, long discussions were carried out with the village elders. This was a difficult task, as they do not like to talk about their dead all the time.

### 3.2: Concept of Death:

Death is looked upon as a mysterious event by the Karbis and its suddenness always creates fear unto the living. The cause of death is an important indicator, which determines the nature of death rituals to be performed. This is always left to be decided by the religious priest – Kathar and consultation is also done with the administrative head *Bangthai*; but the final decision is of Kathar's. From their elaborate mortuary rituals, coupled with the formal erection of megaliths in the name of the deceased establishes their belief that the death is a process, by which the soul get shifted from its mundane state to the other world of the dead. Thus, for the Karbis, the death is a transition of the soul of the dead and goes to the other spirit, a world where its ancestors or relatives reside. For them the death is not the end of a

person's existence. The spirit of the deceased will continue to influence the lives of his living relatives with blessings or curses depending on how he was treated by the living.

Their concept of death is closely associated with Hindu concept where *Baikuntha* (the abode of Lord Vishnu) and the *Narak* (the hell) have also found a place as an abode of death. The traditional *Jom Recho* or the Jom Raja is regarded as the lord of spirits who rules the *Jom Arong* – his abode beneath the ground where the dead spirits reside. The entry of the deceased's soul to the Yama's town is subject to the detailed performance of the rituals by the relatives of the deceased. Unless these rituals satisfy the Yama, the entry is prohibited and soul has to wander around. It is because of this belief that the Karbis are very careful in the performance of the death rituals.

Like in any other society, the Karbis also differentiate death according to the nature of its occurrence. Two broad categories are i) natural death and ii) unnatural death. Natural death is looked upon as a normal and good sign while unnatural death is regarded as an omen. It is believed that such death occurs to a sinful person and such death is mated to the person according to the sins committed by the person during his/her lifetime. Deaths due to suicide, epidemic, accidents etc, are regarded as unnatural deaths. They have separate provisions for dealing with such unnatural deaths, which are not usually elaborate.

The unnatural death is looked upon as bad death and is looked upon as an ominous sign for the family of the deceased. The body, in such cases is taken to a separate cemetery, not the community cemetery, and left there to

get decomposed. The bereaved family are supposed to perform some additional rites over and above what is prescribed for normal death, so as to get rid of impending danger.

### **3.3: Concept of Soul**

The Karbi concept of soul is somewhat similar to that of the Hindus. They differentiate body from soul; believe on a life of the soul after death and rebirth. At any stage of its life the soul is believed to have bearings on its family especially at the initial stage of its migration from the body. The family members perform various rites to make it free from various types of evil spirits that may come on its way to its heavenly abode. This belief in the world of spirits rests on the actual fact that a dead person continues to affect society' (Brown, 1922: 304); the soul is considered as a sacred entity and assumed as having supernatural power. Sometimes the soul is also invited to solve some earthly problems. The soul after the death migrates to its predetermined abode and later takes rebirth. Rebirth is again subject to successful performance of the death rituals and more importantly the "*shradha*" ceremony. The soul may take rebirth in any form and usually believed to come back to its society while the Hill Karbis believe that it takes rebirth in its own family.

### **3.4: Erection of Megaliths, etc, and the Journeys of Soul:**

The traditional belief is that the soul during its lifetime visits its family and society on different occasions. A separate place outside the village is kept reserved as resting place or transit camp of the soul. The place is called *silputa* ( i.e., a place where memorial stones are erected). Here, the families erect permanent monoliths or megaliths in memory of the dead and on the pedestal of each megalith or monolith place a flat stone for resting of the soul during

it's to and from journey. It is the place where they provide food and other items that were loved by the departed annually. The concept is that

### 3.5: Pre Crematory Preparation of the Body:

For a full understanding of the mortuary customs of a community we require to examine the detailed information regarding the prescribed rules of behaviour. Information on this point has been recorded by various writers on the hill Karbis but information about the plains Karbis is scanty. Despite the fact that, this account is based on the observed data in various plains Karbi villages, I would suggest that a more detailed studies could be profitably be made.

The death of a person is first confirmed by the *Baidya* or the *Kabiraj* of the village or very often the elders. Once it is confirmed, the formal announcement is made and then all relatives are informed of the death and if possible pay their respects to the dead. The essence of the funeral that is to follow is that it brings together all the kin. People especially the village elders assemble in the deceased's house. Then arrangement is made to bring out the body of the person died. Like in case of Hindus, the Karbis also consider plantain leave (*Ocimum sanctum*) very sacred. Water purified with plantain leaves is used to clean a place outside the residence where the body will be kept till it is ready for the last journey to the cemetery. A bamboo cot is spread in the specific place and thereafter the body is brought out. The corpse is also purified with the plantain water and then clothed with a fresh dhoti if it is a man or otherwise a *mekhala*. Usually body is not kept in that position for long. But if in case some important relatives are supposed to arrive to give the final respect to the diseased, the body is kept for some time. Necessary food,



etc, is served to the deceased during this period along with the *Har* (the country liquor). The relative of the deceased may offer him or her the food articles that the deceased loved during his lifetime. This offerings of the food article is done using the left hand perhaps to differentiate giving to a living being and to a dead one.

Outside the house, the young males prepare a corpse carrier. The items are, one tough bamboo and a roughly woven bamboo mat commonly called the *Dhari*. The corpse is then tied to the bamboo firmly so that it does to get lose on its way to cemetery. The Karbis in plains are identified by their *khel* system. Each village has its own *khel* to which usually every villager is a member. Some villagers however may be members of *khels* of their original village or some may leave their village *khel* due to dispute and take membership of *khels* of a nearby village. Such things happen in minor proportion. All administrative and judiciary power of the village rests with the *Khel*. The deceased cannot be taken to cremation if he/she does not belong to the *khel* of the village. One representative of the *khel* to which he/she belong, shall have to come to the village and allow it to be taken to *thiri* (cemetery). At this stage, the deceased is also offered with betel nut and betel leaf.

### **3.6: The Cremation:**

In the meantime, the cremation ground is prepared by some village people. Usually the elders take the lead in preparing the pyre. The system preparing the pyre is more or less similar to that of the Hindus. It is prepared in North –South direction.

The sons and the young boys of the village than pull up the corpse and make seven rounds the house and in each round, the corpse is made to touch the wall of the main house to give him/her the last touch of his house where he lived during his life time. In some cases the number of rounds is reduced to three – which is the standardised number. The body is then taken to the cemetery. The villagers also follow the corpse along with the Kathar (priest) who conducts the cremation. There is no bar for the female members to attend the cemetery. On reaching the cemetery, the body is again purified with plantain water and then it is placed on the ground after making three rounds the pyre in east-west direction. Thereafter, the corpse is put up on the pyre. Usually the body is put up in the pyre in the north-south direction and then firewood is placed upon it in nine strata. Then the pyre is lit up by the family members and other neighbours.

After the cremation is over, people leave the place leaving one aged person behind. But before they reach their village they lit up a fire and jump across it. They believe that, in case any ghost takes shelter in someone's body that would burn up in the fire while jumping across it. The aged person, who was left behind, would then take a thorny branch of a tree and draw a line on the ground along the boundary of the pyre chanting a mantra. This is the barrier put up between the living and the deceased. This line is not to be crossed by any man – the person beyond that line is no longer a man but becomes a Debota (deity).

### **3.7: Post Cremation Rituals:**

The family of the deceased would take only boiled rice and salt till the third day of the occurrence of death. In certain cases the number of days is

extended to five or seven depending on the wishes of the family. But whatever may be the days, it is usually odd numbered days. Karbi death rites are completely a community affair right from the cremation to observing Shradha. After the lapse of the period of three, five or seven days, as opted by the family, people of the village gather in the deceased's house on the next day. They bring with them various items like fish, chicken, vegetables, etc, and start cooking. Among the items prepared, one curry with fish and alkali (*khar*) is a must; that is why the observance is called *Khar mach*. After preparation of the items, they put all the items in a dish with left hand and place it in one corner of the compound inviting the departed soul to have the food. This is what they call *pinda dan*. The words come from Hindu rite of offering *pindas* to the departed soul – it is similar like the Hinduised practice of offering food to the deceased on the day of *Matchya Sparsha* (touching of fish by the members of the deceased) although the Hindus perform it after the “sradha” ceremony. The observation of *Khar-Mach* enables the family of the deceased to come back to normal life. After offering the food to the deceased, all the family members take the food together. The Karbis living in towns perform this ceremony as “*Daha*” (i.e. rites performed on the tenth day) almost like Hindus.

Performing Sradha is the final death ritual. The belief is that until and unless *sradha* is performed, the spirit of the deceased could not get a place to reside. There is no hard and fast rule that provides for performing the “sradha” on a particular day; but it should preferably be within the year of the death. The day for “Sradha” is fixed according to the ability of the family. Although a major part of the cost of performing “Sradha” is bourn by the villagers, yet there are certain obligations from the part of the deceased's family also which

may be burdensome. This is one reason why the society do not impose a fix date for performing the “Sradha” The observance of “Sradha” ceremony among the Hill Karbis is a far more an elaborate affair, which they call “*Chamangkan*”. Among the plains Karbis however, it is simple but they have preserved the peculiar ritual of erecting megaliths or microliths on the day of *sradha*. The following table shows the details of the “*sradhas*” pending more than one year.\

**Table-3.7: : *Sradhas* Pending More than One year**

Name of the villages	Nos of deceased in the year (2005)	Sradha Performed within time	Pending beyond one year	Reason
Japorigog	5	5	0	
Moinakhurung	3	2	1	Economic
Narakasur	3	3	0	
Gumaria	2	1	1	Economic
Hengerabari	4	2	2	One economic other non arrival of son
Morangabari	1	0	1	Economic
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	

The “Sradha” is considered as a costly affair mainly because its observance requires at least one pig – not small, but a fully grown pig. A pig of such size costs around Rs 2000 to Rs 3000 according to its availability. Spending such a huge amount of cash is not a simple matter. Most of the Karbi villagers are of lower middle-income earning people. In fact, they are simply at the subsistence level of living. The family when decides about the day of *sradha*, informs and invites the *Kathar* and the *Burha bangthai* (the administrative head of the village) about the date. The *Bangthai* then engages

the “*Hariya*” (messenger) to inform the villagers about the “*sradha*”. The distant relatives of the family are also informed accordingly.

### 3.8: Erection of Megaliths:

On the day before the *sradha* - a young group of people along with the Kathar (priest) go to the nearby hills with a potful of Harlung (Har lung = Karbi rice beer considered as a sacred item) and some coins to find out a pair of typical stones (*Long-dang*) required to erect as monolith and the resting spot. It is a triangular shaped elongated stone with the top getting smaller although not pointed and apparently appears to be flat. Another type of round flat stone is selected so as to make sitting arrangement with it for the soul to take rest. After selection of the stones, they are worshipped offering bear and coin and saying that “..... sri amuk ( the name of the person) has died and for him we will be taking you to *lang ae*. Kindly help us taking you there without difficulty.” After the ritual, they leave the spot. On the day of *sradha* early in the morning, the same group along with others go to the hill and bring the stone already selected. They carry the stone on a carriage made of branches of *Modar* tree (*Erythrina stricta*) and sugarcane. The stones are brought to a place called *Long ae*. This is the place where they erect the stone monuments in memory of the deceased. There are variations in the name of the place. As the stones are called *long dang* the place name also has the Assamese version – *longdang-guri*.

The elongated stone is then erected straight on the specified ground in the *Long-ae* and this is considered as representing the deceased. If the deceased was a male, the stone is dressed in male attire with a *Paguri* (turban) on the top while a female is dressed in female attire. At the bottom of it, the

flat round stone is put up over three small stones like a three legged table. Here the *pinda* (the offerings to a deceased) is offered. Pig and other offerings brought for the ceremony is sacrificed here and the meat and blood is cooked without spices in bamboo cylinders specially prepared for the ceremony is offered to the deceased.

### 3.9: The Sradha Ceremony:

While this group is working on erecting megaliths, the other i.e. in the family front, the Kathar comes in the morning to the residence of the deceased and first purify the residence and then all family members. There is a specific procedure laid down for this purpose. While purifying, apart from *Tulsi*, leaves of two other plants are also used; one of which is called *Kuchia kata* and the other is *harha kata*. Another important plant used in the process is known as *Tibung or thubang* – a sugar cane like plant ( *Phragmatis sara* = Khagori or common reed) found in the jungle. Three *thubongs* are tied in one – with *tangal* (thick bamboo filament or twine); the *sesuks* (the waste of bamboos) produced in the process are not to be wasted but kept separately for use. On the body of the *thubongs* on each joint, the *harh kata* and *Kuchia katas* are tied. Then these *thubongs* are placed on one bank of the stream and on the other bank, bamboos prepared specifically for this purpose are fixed in such a way that the top of both bamboo and *thubong* touches each other and the structure appears like a gate over the stream. A small round basket of bamboo is than made and hanged from the middle of the joining point of the gate-like structure and the *sesuks* (bamboo waste) and an egg is placed within it. This is the holy egg and is considered as soul.

Next is the purification stage. Each of the members of the family are now to cross the gate like structure across the stream and on the direction to which the water flows. The Kather standing on the other side of the gate chants mantras. Each member throws the kuchia kata behind him or her as he or she crosses the gate. On the other side fire is lighted where some aromatic items (dhuna = canarium bengalense) are given and each of the members after crossing the gate take the warmth of the fire on their faces with their hands. Now it is turn of the Kather to examine whether the members are actually purified or not. It is determined through divination. A bamboo cylinder (*chunga*) is prepared and harh kata and Kuchia kata are put inside it. The chungu is then cut across so as to make it in two equal parts. Thereafter, the egg which was put inside the pot is brought back and cut into two pieces with a special knife by the Kathar. Then it is checked whether the divisions are symmetrical. Then the two parts of the bamboo cylinder, held in such a way as if it is one piece and suddenly released to the ground. If, of the two parts, one fell showing the face on top and the other giving the back on top, then the purification is taken as complete. Otherwise the whole exercise is repeated. This is done up to three times. If even after three times, the bamboo parts do not fall on the ground showing complete purification, then it is taken as incomplete purification. However, the process is not repeated any further.

Each karbi villagers have a strong and stout post supporting the roof in their kitchen, which is called – *Nang-pe* or popularly known as *mudha khuta*. It is considered as sacred post and so is the kitchen. For them it is the place where devatas (deities) reside. The kathar after the *sudhhi* (purification), come to the kitchen and scatter the specially prepared *pitha Guri* (rice powder) mixed with water on the *Nang-pe* and in all doors of the house. On this day, all the

villagers used to bring something for the *sradha* according to their mite. The pig and other animals sacrificed in the *Long-ae*, (*silputa*) is later brought to the deceased's house. The meat is prepared with the *Damabru* leave.

While the preparation for the *sradha* feast is going on, the *Kathar* alone or sometimes with another person goes to a silent place nearby to perform the rite called *Jiuli Mata* (*inviting the soul*). He lights a lamp and calls for the soul of the deceased requesting him/ her to come. He catches an insect there symbolizing it as the soul of the deceased and bring it to the house of the deceased and place it on the *Nang-pe*- saying that "I have placed you here. From now onward you will live here." The *Kathar* leaves the insects there and it is believed that from then onwards the soul lives in that place. The *Karbis* therefore believe the kitchens as the most sacred place. After this establishment of the soul, a small portion of all the items cooked are taken to the *Long-ae* all the relatives gift an amount on the platform of the megalith with left hand and thereafter return home. The *kathar* chants mantra and only after completion of the rites, feast begins. Thus *sradha* is complete.

The problem of life and death happens to be the most burning questions that the mankind has faced since ages. It was not completely in people's consciousness that a person was alive, had lived and then suddenly was no more since he had died. People always like to prolong the existence of a person. The result of this desire is the belief in the spirit – the second life of the soul. It is a type of consolation, because there is no doubt about the physical death. The concept of soul still has not improved much than what *Taylor* observed more than a century back i.e the soul is a subtle, immaterial



human form, somewhat like steam, air, or a shadow in its nature; it forms the reason for life and thought in that being which it animates. (1871)

For the Karbis mortuary practices as discussed above is more an emotional satisfaction than any significant sociological understanding. Belief in spirit is the central theme of the practices. This spirit is figured in their ritual beliefs and practices. Two other things are also made the subject of this ritual. Firstly there is his body, which must be disposed of in some way. Secondly there is what Radcliffe-Brown (1950) calls his *social personality*, "the sum of characteristics by which he has an effect upon the social life and therefore on the social sentiments of others. .... A person occupies a definite position in society, has a certain share in the social life, and is one of the supports of the network of social relations." He goes on to say that "death constitutes a partial destruction of the social cohesion, the normal social life is disorganised, the social equilibrium is disturbed. After the death the society has to organise itself anew and reach a new condition of equilibrium."

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## CONCLUSION

Funerary rituals take many forms and the Karbis –both hills and plains have their unique rituals in this context. Hill Karbis perform *Chamangkan* after the disposal of the dead. Deviations exist from location to location but such deviations are not significant and structural and institutional parts are always found common. Performance of mortuary rites involve huge financial burden which these poverty ridden people could not bear at one go and therefore in many cases it was found deferred- sometimes for more than two years.

A unique feature of mortuary practices of Karbis of Plains is the erection of megaliths. This was practiced by many tribes of northeast but the tradition is almost forgotten now; however with the Karbis of Plains it is still a living tradition.

Megalithic cultures can be traced from Britain to France in Europe, the Mediterranean Coast, Palestine, Arabia, the Caucasus, Iran, the North West part of the Indian sub continent (where the non-Muslim Kafirs until recently has a megalithic culture), central and South India, Assam, mainland South East Asia, Indonesia, the Philippines island. Large stone figures of megalithic type may even be found in the remains of civilisations of pre Cambrian America.

Generally, most customs are in some way related to the dead. The stones quarried and erected with such effort link the dead and living, though different people lay varying emphasis on the mysterious power of megaliths to

attract and absorb the spiritual virtue of man. In the Karbi tradition emphasis is laid on the departed and it is believed to benefit the living. They offer food and other items to their deceased ancestors in this sacred place on various occasions and only after these offerings, they take their own food. There are also places where practice of divination is also found to associate side by side the offerings of food.

Karbi ritual tradition on the whole is an oral tradition; there is no written manual containing the detailed ritual structure and their procedure. What happens, in the wake of secularisation, there was a tendency for abbreviation or complete omission of the elaborate life cycle rituals while emphasis was given on the reception, etc. In the process much of the essence and beauty of the ritual has been lost.

The very symbolic nature of these rituals makes them worth preserving for aesthetic value loaded with symbolism.

Karbi worldview is centred round the concept of soul, its loss, its reincarnation, (the reincarnation indeed follows the patrilineal form of descent) and it comes alive in their rituals. This is quite significant from the point of view of social order. As Hertz (1960) says morning behaviour as well as conception of death itself and status of the corpse and soul are social production. Mortuary practices address a number of social requirements. Among the most important, the dead person must be detached socially and then reintegrated as a non-living member of the society. While doing so the social order is reconstituted. (Hertz, 1960, 27-86). Thus, to understand the internal forces that acts and reacts and finally modifies or reorients the social order we need to understand the connected rituals.

A detailed study of this intangible part of their culture will help understanding the processes how the elements of one culture are accepted, modified and reinterpreted and become integrated into their world view. In fact such action is needed for all the North East communities.

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**ANNEXURE- I**

**LIST OF TARGET VILLAGES**

Sl No	Villages	District
1	Gumaria	Kamrup (Metropolitan) District
2	Khetri	-do-
3	Markang	-do-
4	Xorutari	-do-
5	Jogdol	-do-
6	Nizpanbari	-do-
7	Thakurkuchi	-do-
8	Hajongbori No-2	-do-
9	Japorigog	-do-
10	Moinakhurung	-do-
11	Narakasur	-do-
12	Sarusajai	-do-
13	Hengerabari	-do-
14	Lungpung	Nagaon
15	Socheng dhenta	-do-