

Karbi Diaspora In Assam: Brief Analysis Of Its Material Culture.

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Abstract:

The paper primarily focuses on the material culture of Karbi Diaspora in Assam. The Karbis represent one of the major ethnic groups in northeast India and who are formerly known as Mikirs. The Karbis are ethnically Mongoloid and linguistically Tibeto-Burman particularly speaking Kuki-Chin sub group of languages. Due to lack of historical records and archaeological findings, the Karbi folktales and folklores form the only source of information with regard to their early history. The migration of Karbis from Burma into Assam probably took place at the beginning of the 17th century through northern Manipur. Although the Karbis dominantly inhabit the hills of Karbi Anglong district, Karbi settlements are also found in few other districts of Assam like Nagaon, Kamrup, Darrang, Golaghat and North Cachar hills.

The Karbis have a very rich and unique material culture. The most significant aspects of Karbi material culture include architecture, food habits, costume and ornament. However, over the years there has been a gradual change in the material culture among the Karbi Diaspora in Assam due to outside influence. This may lead to a cultural dilution of the traditional Karbi material culture among the Karbi Diaspora in the years ahead.

Key Words: Karbi Diaspora, Migration, Material culture, Architecture, Food habits, Costume and Ornament

The paper will mainly focus on the material culture among the Karbi Diaspora in Assam.

The Karbis represent one of the major ethnic groups in northeast India and were formerly known as *Mikirs*. The Karbis mainly inhabit the hills of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council of Assam but, Karbi settlements are also found in several other districts of Assam like Nagaon, Kamrup, Darrang, Golaghat and North Cachar hills. The migration pattern of Karbis in Assam was overwhelmingly rural to rural, consisting largely of migration between neighbouring districts of Assam. Due to dearth of historical records and archaeological evidences, it is very difficult to trace the chronological events of the Karbis. The folklores are

the only sources from which one can have an idea of their early history. It is believed that the Karbis entered Assam from Burma (present day Myanmar) through northern Manipur and south western Nagaland. This migration probably took place during the first and second millennia before Christ. Referring to a Karbi tradition J.H. Hutton and H. Bareh mention that southern Nagaland offered a land route to the Karbis migrating from Burma via Manipur hills through which a passage was made by tribes who preceded the present people of the Patkai hills. The myth of Karbi migration forms an important genre of folk narratives and, is therefore a possible guide to trace the tribe's history. The folklores of the Karbis suggest that the Karbis once inhabited the banks of the rivers the Kolong and the Kopili and, the entire Kaziranga area in Assam. During the reigns of the Kachari kings, the

Karbis were driven to the hills and some of them entered into the Jaintia hills, the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and lived under the Jaintia regime. Some of the Karbis remain in the Jaintia kingdom while others moved towards northeast by crossing the river Barapani, tributary of the Kopili and entered into the Rongkhang ranges. There the Karbis established their capital at a place called Socheng. The Karbis who continued to live in the Jaintia kingdom faced constant harassment at the hands of the Jaintias. Consequently, a good number of Karbis migrated towards north ward and entered the Ahom territory and, sought protection from the Borphukan at Raha. This migration took place at the beginning of the 17th century. The Karbis who migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face inhuman oppression when the Burmese invaded Assam. As a result Karbis took refuge in the deep jungle and high hills leaving their home in the sub mountain regions. During the Burmese invasion some of the Karbis migrated to lower Assam while some has crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in the North bank.

Like many other tribal groups of the world, the Karbis did not have a written language and hence there is no written history about their origin, spread and settlement. It was only after the advent of the Ahoms into Assam in 1228 A.D, that some information pertaining to Karbi migration into Ahom territory and Karbi-Ahom political relations has become known as these were recorded clearly in the Ahom Buranji (Ahom History). S.K. Chatterjee and P.C. Choudhury wrote accounts about the origin and migration of the Karbis. (Phangcho, 2003) Stack and Lyall mention that Khyeng (Chin group of people who in the present times largely inhabit western Burma) tribe has some customs such as cross-cousin marriage, cremation of the dead, holding feast in honour of the dead, right of inheritance of the son, etc. which are quite similar to those of the Karbis. Interestingly Stack and Lyall further mention some rivers and places of North Cachar hills, southern Nagaland, northern Manipur, which have Karbi names although no Karbis live there now.

This is indicative of the fact that the Karbis in the course of their early migration from the Burma side lived in these areas in the past. Further, Karbis also bear strong Austric culture in respect of certain practices relating to the dead such as installing monolith (memorial stone), word formation such as the prefix

‘Ka’ in female names, etc. although their culture is basically Tibeto-Burman in origin. Considering these evidences it can be said that the route of migration of the Karbis from Burma into the present Karbi Anglong and its neighbourhood was through northern Manipur, south-western Nagaland and north-eastern part of North Cachar Hills. Referring to the indigenous tribes of Jaintia Hills, Khasi Hills and Hamren sub-division of Karbi Anglong (all contiguous), namely the Sntengs (Jaintias), Khasis and Karbis respectively, K.L.Barua opines, that the Karbis perhaps migrated to Northeast India after the Austro-Asiatic Khasis but before other Tibeto-Burman groups. Noted historian B.K.Barua states that the earliest inhabitants of Assam were speakers of the Mon-Khmer family of languages. Historian and linguist S.K. Chatterji has included all the tribes of Assam including the Bodos, the Nagas, the Kuki-Chin, the Khasis, etc. in the group of ‘Kirata’ which has been correct to say that the Kiratas including the Karbis (at least the earliest batch of them if not all) came to settle in ancient Assam before the compilation of the Mahabharata i.e. much before the beginning of the Christian era. The Karbis are divided into four major groups *Amri, Ronghang, Chinthong and Dumurali*. Out of them the *Dumuralis* have migrated from the greater Karbi Anglong area to southern part of Nagaon district covering mainly Jamunamukh on the east to Sonapur (in southern Kamrup) on the west. According to information gathered, they migrated to the plains after the Ahoms had already established themselves as the master of the area covering greater part of the Brahmaputra valley. The time of migration of the *Dumuralis* is not exactly known. According to a tradition prevalent in Panbari, Chenimur, Sonapur and Jagiroad, a

group of Karbis came down from the neighbouring hills on the south and established a kingdom under the king named *Dumura*. Henceforth these people came to be known as *Dumurali* or *Thoi Aso* (meaning plain dweller) by their counterpart in hills. Even now they are covering Sonapur, Khetri and Jagiroad lying between East Khasi hills on the south and Kalang River on the north which is known as Dimoria (older term Dimoria must have come from *Dumura*).

Objectives of the study

To focus on the material culture of the Karbi Diaspora

To analyse how Karbis are incorporating new cultural spheres in the process of migration

Research Methods

Empirical data are obtained through conversation, personal contact, photography, personal knowledge, observation and participation with some old age people. Besides secondary data are collected from e-resources, journals and books.

Research Analysis

Material culture of a particular community can be best studied from its architecture, food habits, costumes, ornaments, etc. A traditional Karbi hut consists of a bamboo platform with a timber super structure. The platform of the houses is several feet high above the ground. The walls are made of split bamboos and for roofing thatch are used. Length wise the house is divided into two parts, the first part (front room has a hearth at the centre, and is called *Kam* or guestroom and the second part (or the bed room) is called *Kut* which is used by the family member as the living room. Each house has two verandas, one at front and other at the rear. The wooden or bamboo ladder is used as an approach to front veranda. In the Karbi Diaspora the traditional Karbi hut has given way to concrete structures. Traditional Karbi huts are mostly found in the remote Karbi villages on Karbi Anglong district.

The traditional food habits of the Karbis constitute a significant aspect of their material

culture. The traditional Karbi cuisine can be broadly divided into three groups.

- *Kangmoi* (alkaline preparation)
- *Kalangdang* (boil preparation)
- *Han-Thor* (sour/acidic preparation)

Besides these traditional cuisines, the food habits of the Karbis include preparation like

- *Kemung* (cooked in bamboo tube)
- *Kangphu* (wrapped in banana leaves)
- *Kephi* (roasting)
- *Karnu Pakreng* (frying without oil)
- *Ke-Ur* (smoking)

Most of the traditional Karbi cuisines have been replaced by modern food habits among the Karbi Diaspora. The traditional Karbi cuisines are limited to ethnic food festivals.

There are separate traditional costumes for Karbi men and women. The Karbi men wear shorts called *Choi-Angro* and shirts called *Choi-Hongthor* along with a head gear called *Poho*. The *Poho* is designed with red and black motifs of geometrical shapes and size and animal figures. It is also used as shoulder cloth similar to that of Assamese *Gamusa*. The women folk wear *Pini-Pekok*. *Pini* is wrapped around the waist and *Pekok* is used to cover the upper part of the body. A waist band called *Vamkok* is also used by Karbi women. *Piba* is used for tying the child at the back of the mother. It (*Piba*) is a richly designed piece of cloth with colourful motifs embedded in it. Traditionally the costumes of Karbis are hand woven. As of today most men and women in the Karbi Diaspora do not use hand woven traditional costumes but, instead they use readymade garments procured from the market. They have limited the use of traditional costumes to the celebration of Karbi festivals.

In the Karbi society different types of traditional ornaments are used by both men and women. The Karbi men usually put on an ear-ring made of brass called *Narik*, a silver bracelet called

Prinsoroi and heavy necklaces called *Lekrooa* and *Lek-Enti*. A Karbi woman traditionally wear a pair of very big ear-rings made of silver called *Nothenpi*. The Karbi girls use silver bracelets called *Rup-Aroir*. Besides the Karbi women also uses a necklace made of white beads called *Lech-Io-So*, and a necklace made of silver coin and red beads called *Lek-Chike*. However, nowadays most of the men and women in the Karbi Diaspora no longer use traditional ornaments and instead use contemporary silver and gold ornaments. The Karbi material culture constitutes a few other significant elements including *Jambili Athon*, *Bongkrok* and *Langpong*.

Jambili Athon is a kind of wooden rod about seven feet long mounted on the upper end by five wooden birds usually the *vojaru* (*Bhimraji* in Assamese) the national bird of the Karbis. It is a highly decorated piece of wood craft which is a symbol of high regards in the Karbi society. This wooden decorated artefact is widely used in ethnic food festivals, Assam Mahotsav, Karbi Youth Festival and other ethnic festivals all over India to distinguish the Karbi community from others. *Jambili Athon* is also considered to be a very important part of the most significant Karbi festival called *Chomangkan* also known as *Karhi* in Karbi which is held for the welfare of the dead. *Karhi* is regarded as the life of the Karbi culture and *Jambili Athon* is regarded as its soul. The celebration of *Karhi* is considered to be incomplete without the use of *Jambili Athon*.

Bongkrok (a bottle of wine with a gourdshell) plays a significant role in any Karbi society be it in Karbi Anglong or in any other district of Assam. Ritual cannot be completed without the *Bongkrok*. *Bongs* are mostly used to worship, celebrate festival, wedding ceremonies called *Adam-Asar* and even in day-to-day life of the Karbis. *Bong* of different sizes and shapes are called specifically refers to gourd shell and such shell, when filled with *horlank* or rice beer, is called *Horbang*. (Hor = alcohol)

Langpong is a bamboo made, elongated and

hollow structure used to serve tea, water, homemade wine called *Hor* and other drinks to their family members, relatives and guests. In order to meet their day to day needs they produce *Langpong* in large quantities. Karbi Diaspora has switch over to the use of cup, saucers and other contemporary utensils to serve their daily requirements.

Thengthe or maize production is done in large scale in any Karbi society as compared to other. Karbis used to keep *Thengthe* or maize in the ceiling of the house. As it is known that hill dwellers practice shifting cultivation up to a great extent, Karbis are no different from this.

The Karbis settled in different parts of Assam have been influenced to a great extent by the material culture of neighbouring communities and elsewhere. This has led to an obvious change in the material culture of the Karbi Diaspora in Assam. Consequently, we observe remarkable changes in their architecture, food habits, costumes and ornaments. The Karbi Diaspora is becoming increasingly vulnerable to external influences resulting in changes of its material culture.

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