



CHOMKAN: A RITUAL DANCE OF THE DEAD, REBIRTH AND AFTERLIFE- AN EMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The Karbi tribe of Assam are primarily animistic in religion locally termed as *Honghari*. They believe that every stage of life and its pursuits whether social or economic is vulnerable to unforeseen supernatural forces. Their religious beliefs centre around soul to which they regard as fundamental to existence. According to their belief, the soul is remained untroubled during a person's lifetime. However, after death, the responsibility falls upon the living relatives and the community to guide the soul to its proper destination, often referred to as the *Chom Arong* meaning village or land of ancestors. For the Karbi, the nature of life and death is not fundamentally different from earthly existence, illustrating their cyclical understanding of life, death and rebirth. For them, death, afterlife and rebirth are interconnected stages in a continuous cycle. Death marks a transition, the afterlife provides a temporary resting place, and rebirth brings the soul back to earthly existence. This belief reflects their deep spiritual connection to family, community and the natural world.

Keywords: Karbi Tribe, *Jambili Athon*, *Chomkan*, Totem, Afterlife, Rebirth

Introduction

Every tradition or belief system approaches unique ideas on the concepts of death, afterlife and rebirth which are deeply rooted in spiritual, philosophical and cultural beliefs. Death brings grief and loss to those left behind. The afterlife refers to the realm where the soul is believed to go after death. To some culture, Heaven and Hell is the eternal destinations determined by a person's deeds and faith, while some focuses on the cycle of rebirth where the soul transitions to another body based on karma (Steiner 1968). Many indigenous cultures view death as a return to the ancestors or nature maintaining a harmonious relationship with the earth and spirits. Justo (2023) talked about the Australian Aboriginal cultures' view on death as a passage from physical realm to the spiritual domain, where the spirit of the deceased reunites with the ancestors. In many Native American cultures, it is believed that the spirits enter a parallel dimension where they intertwined with nature, which emphasizes a connection between afterlife and the natural environment (Popovic 2024). Ceremonies conducted by the priest or shaman play a significant role in honouring the deceased, by serving as mediators between the human world and the spirit realm. The Hmong people of China hold animistic belief and view death as a transition where the soul reincarnates into humans, animals or even inanimate objects. They hold an elaborate death ritual which is performed to guide the journey of the soul back to its origin and ensure a harmonious return to the cycle of life and death (Tapp 1989).

The Karbi have a unique understanding of death, afterlife and rebirth that reflects their animistic beliefs and cyclical view of existence. In their tradition, death is not viewed as the end but rather a transition into another stage of life. The soul is the central of their belief system and is considered the essence of a person. While a person is alive, the soul remains undisturbed residing within the body. When that person dies, the soul is believed to leave the body and must embark on a journey to its ancestral realm (Phangcho 2007).

They believe that the soul travels to the afterlife called *Chom Arong*, the land of the ancestors. This realm mirrors earthly life, where souls reside peacefully. However, the journey to *Chom Arong* is believed to be challenging and requires guidance from the living.

The Karbi strongly believe in rebirth within the same clan or lineage. The soul after reaching *Chom Arong* and resting for a period is eventually reincarnated into the family. This belief strengthens the family ties and endures the continuity of lineage. Unlike Hindu or Buddhist traditions, the Karbi believe that the soul does not undergo karmic cycles; instead, rebirth is a natural and inevitable

process, integral to their understanding of life and death. For instance, a woman might be reborn as her brother's daughter, or a father as his son's son, reliving family relationships in new forms (Teron 2008).

The Karbi Community

The Karbi is a major hill tribe of Assam, primarily residing in the Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts and parts of the neighbouring hill district of Dima Hasao and plains districts of Biswanath (formerly part of Sonitpur), Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup (Metro). They are also found to be residing in some areas of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland states. They were previously known as 'Mikir' during the British rule but this term is now considered derogatory. They call themselves as 'Arleng' or slanting place of a hill, thus literally meaning people leaving on the slanting hill.

As of 2011 census, the Karbi population in India is estimated to be over 800,000 (8 lakhs) as in the North Eastern region of the country and in the Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts was 538,738.

The Karbi belong to the Mongoloid race and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman group more particularly linked to the Kuki-Chin subgroup of languages (Stack: 1908). Migration memories (*Mosera Kihir*) suggests that the Karbi like the other Mongoloid groups who arrived from Northwest China and Tibet via Burma settled in North East India (Bey 2004).

In view from the point of habitation, the Karbi living in the hills are divided into three groups, namely, *Chinthong*, *Rongkhang* and *Amri* while those living in the plains are called *Dumrali*. These groups do not differ from one another.

The Karbi is a patrilineal tribe meaning that the family structure is patriarchal with inheritance passed through the father's line. They are composed of five major clans or *Kur*. They are *Lijang (Engti)*, *Hanjang (Terang)*, *Ejang (Inghi)*, *Kronjang (Teron)* and *Tungjang (Timung)* which are again divided into many sub-clans or *Kur-so*. The clan is strictly exogamous meaning marriage within the same clan is prohibited. Cross-cousin marriage is preferred more particularly the Mother's-Brother's-Daughter (MBD) type, which initially was prescribed between the cousins and existed in order to keep family property within the family. However, this type of marriage is rarely practiced in the contemporary times. After marriage, the women retain their own clan as conversion to her husband's clan will imply incest; however, her children will take the clan of her husband. Also, a couple whose mothers belong to the same clan is also considered a sibling. The traditional system of governance is headed by the *Lindok* or the king, who is assisted by the *Katharpo*, the *Dili*, the *Habe* and the *Pinpo*. These posts of administration, however, are now merely ceremonial with no real power. The Karbi traditionally practice jhum cultivation or shifting agriculture, growing crops like rice, maize, ginger, and turmeric. Integration with the market economy has brought challenges, altering their self-sufficient way of life.

The Karbi are basically animists and their religious belief starts with soul, blending elements of nature worship with traditional beliefs. They do not have idols or shrines as such to observe rituals dedicated to their deities namely, *Hemphu*, *Mukrang* and *Rasinja* among the many.

Objectives

The main objective of the present paper is to look into *Chomkan* and its cultural significance practiced by the Karbi and beliefs in the afterlife and rebirth.

Methodology

The study is based on the data collected during 2016-2017 from Langprat Engti Village, Behali, Biswanath district of Assam. The study hinges on both primary as well as secondary data. The primary data have been collected directly from the field through observation method (participant and non-participant), interview method and such standard anthropological method. It may be mentioned that the present study incorporates an emic perspective as the researcher herself hails from / belongs to the tribe. The secondary data is derived from books, documents, articles, reports, etc.

Results and Discussions

The *Chomkan* (also called *Chomangkan* or **Karhi**) is a rich and intricate funeral ritual that blends solemnity, spirituality and vibrant cultural expression of the Karbi tribe of the hills. Primarily this ritual honours the deceased and celebrates their transition to *Chom Arong*. Unlike most cultures, the Karbi view death as a passage to rebirth, with no concepts of heaven or hell. The soul, believed to be eternal, reincarnates within the same clan lineage, ensuring continuity of familial bonds. The *Chom Arong* is believed to lie beyond the inaccessible hill *Mukindong Anglong* and until the *Chomkan* is performed, the soul of the deceased cannot enter its proper abode or be reborn (Bordoloi 1982).

This ritual associated with cremation was introduced by a man named *Thireng Wangreng* who was believed to be the only person that could travel between the two lands (living and dead). The ritual comprises three types- *Kanphlaphla Chomkan*, *Langtuk Chomkan* and *Harne Chomkan* and is performed based on a family's financial capability. *Kanphlaphla* is generally held in the compound of the deceased house itself, while *Langtuk* and *Harne* are performed in an open area nearby where a *langtuk* or deep pit is dug. Irrespective of the social and economic status of the family, this ritual is performed in the most elaborate and expensive manner (Bordoloi 1982).

Jambili Athon, totem of the Karbi is a traditional and cultural wooden craft that holds deep symbolic significance that represents the Karbi people's heritage, values and unity. This intricately carved structure is made from *Bengvoi Ke-er* (*wrightia coccinea* also known as scarlet *wrightia*). The crafting of a *Jambili Athon* requires skilled artisans who understand its symbolism and structure and only the *Baroi* (the artisan who makes the *Jambili Athon*) can create the totem as per the customary law of the Karbi. This totem is black coloured pole consisting of a central pillar on which *Vo- Jaru* (racket tailed Drongo) sits on top of the pole that symbolises

the *Lindok* or King of the Karbi. From the pole four or five branches extend outward symmetrically, on each branch sits *Vo- Rale* (Spangled Drongo) representing one of the five *Kur* or clans of the Karbi. Below *Vo- Rale* sits two *Vo- Leng Cheret* (Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker) that represents the people who are responsible for carrying food for the king. The eyes of the birds are made using seeds of *Chu selok* (*Abrusprecatorius*, *Fabaceae*), which add lifelike features.

In between the layers of *Vo- Jaru* and *Vo- Rali* are *Bong Krok* (Gourd Shell) and *Hor Bong* (bottle of rice beer) are crafted signifying the Karbi culture. Then again in between the layers of *Vo- Rale* and *Vo- Leng Cheret* are *Hor Tebuk* (barrel of rice beer) and *Bong Dam Dam* (bottlegourd) representing the household and agricultural land alters. In between there are *hathu angrong* (inflorescence of *Gnetumgnemon* L.), *long aling* (mortar), *roi* (bracelet), *bong amu* (seed of bottle gourd), etc. The totem is firmly rooted in a strong base representing stability and foundation of the Karbi tradition and is beautifully adorned with *lek* (beads) of many kinds. However, the carvings and ornaments are not uniform in all *Jambili Athon* (Teron 2008).

Jambili Athon, plays a significant role in *Chomkan*. The totem is not owned personally, it can only be kept with the *Sarthe* or village headman and so, one village will own one totem.

Chomkan is a ritual that spans for three or four days. The host called *Ari* sends invitation to the villages nearby asking them to participate at the ritual. The participant village(s) called *Chomphang* arrives at the host village, led by the *Klengsarpo* or youth leader, consists of dancers and drummers as well and brings along with them their totem. Each totem will be adorned with ornaments and beads for beautification. *Chomkan* is an expensive ritual as the host family provides all the guests with food and shelter for the next few days.

The ceremony spans for three or four days depending on the type of *Chomkan* performed by the host family; *Kanphlaphla Chomkan* spans for three days and the *Langtuk* and *Harne Chomkan* spans for four days. This ceremony is filled with dances, music, and symbolic offerings.

The first day begins with a ceremony called *Ruh-Kehum*, the symbolic return of the soul from the *tipit* or cremation ground to the house of the deceased. The key participants of the ceremony are *Charhepi* who is the traditional woman crier who led the rituals. She acts as a spiritual guide, reciting the epic oral history, performs rituals and weeps on behalf of the family throughout the *Chomkan*. Two pairs of *Dhihudi* and *Dhuihujang* are drummers who accompany the ceremony. The *sobai* or cowrie shell representing the soul, which is temporarily buried on the very place at the cremation ground is then dug out and taken home by nicely wrapping it with *pibah*, a black cloth used for carrying babies. The *Ubok* or baby sitter carries the cowrie shell on their back symbolising the reincarnation of the girl who once carried the deceased person during infancy. On reaching home, the cowrie, now supposed to be a living soul is then treated with great honour. An effigy of the deceased person is made out of paddy straw in which the cowrie is placed. A specially prepared food including *Kove* or areca nut and leaf and *Hor-lang* or rice beer is offered to the deceased spirit and is also said to be performed by the *Charhepi*. While offering *Anjam* she also invokes the spirit of the dead to come to life on this particular occasion. She sings songs of lamentations called *Kacharhe Alun*, this song of elegy is sung by the *Charhepi* and she is joined by any other old women who are well versed in this subject. On the final day, the effigy of the deceased which is crafted from paddy straws is carried to the cremation ground, just as a real body would be carried with honour. In a final act of farewell, the effigy is then placed on a pyre and consumed by fire.

Chomkan is generally for three or four days, with participants adhering to specific obligations throughout each phase. Unlike other ceremonies, it imposes numerous do's and don'ts. One of the most intriguing yet potentially embarrassing aspects of the celebration is the singing of the *Kapa-er* song. This song, filled with the obscenest words imaginable, is performed by a group of young boys who dance in perfect rhythm. The singing of *Kapa-er* at times may overlap with the *Charhepi*'s lamentations. It seems paradoxical that such a moment of bereavement would be marked by vulgar songs sung in a joyful manner. However, the origin of this practice is rooted in an ancient belief.

According to legend, a man named *Thireng Vangreng* married the daughter of *Yama Recho*, the king of the dead. Through this union, he was granted the ability to travel between the world of the living and the world of the dead. During his visits to *yama arong*, he discovered that everything in the afterlife was inverted- a crab became a tiger, a newt became a king, a butterfly transformed into an elephant and a fish turned into a stick. To honour this strange reversal of norms, *Thireng Vangreng* introduced the *Kapa-er* song into *Chomkan*, believing that what was obscene in the world of the living would be a source of amusement for the deceased in the city of dead.

There is a rich description of traditional dances performed during *Chomkan*. Each dance seems to carry deep cultural significance, whether it's the warrior dance like *Chomkedam Kekan*, the social and exogamous *Nimso-kerung Kekan*, or the structured *Banjar Kekan* with its symbolic rounds. The *Chomkedam Kekan* recreates the legendary deeds of Thong Nokbe, a revered Karbi warrior known for his strength and valour. The core of this dance serves as vital part of the community's funerary traditions reinforcing social cohesion and cultural identity and also a tribute to their legendary figure. The *Nimso-kerung Kekan* performed by the unmarried youths serves multiple cultural and social purposes such as courtship and social interactions as well as cultural expressions and identity. It shows essence the cultural value, social norms and community bonding, all of which are significantly shaped by the practice of clan exogamy and is a fundamental aspect of their social structure. The *Banjar Kekan* dance not only serves as a medium for communal expression but also has a cultural and spiritual significance. It is believed that by performing this dance, it helps in guiding the souls to the afterlife ensuring safe passage for them.

Chomkan is a profound and beautifully expressed perspective on the Karbi concept of life, death and afterlife. It presents death not as the end but as a ritual passage that ensures the soul's transition and return in an eternal cycle. The *Charhepi*, as a guiding figure akin to a shaman, highlights the ceremonial role in leading the soul to its rightful place. *Chomkan* illustrates the Karbi perception of death as a transition, rather than an end, emphasising rebirth within the family lineage and reinforces the belief in continuity over

finality, making death a mere shift in identity rather than an ultimate departure. It serves as a medium to express respect for the deceased and to strengthen the community's beliefs in the cyclical nature of existence.

Conclusion

The *Chomkan* is the reflection of the Karbi community's outlook on life and death, embodying their belief in the soul as eternal. For the Karbi, death is not viewed as the end but in fact a transition to the afterlife and journey to the land of the ancestors called *Chom Arong*. This ritual serves as a ceremonial farewell which allows the family, relatives and the community to send off the deceased with honour, affection and joy while weeping and grieving. However, grief and sadness are balanced with elements of celebration, reflecting the belief that the soul's journey continues beyond the mortal realm. The activities of feasting, singing and dancing during this ritual shows the community's acceptance of joy as natural and necessary parts of life. *Chomkan* emphasises that it is not just a funeral ritual but also a celebration of life and continuity which is rooted in the Karbi worldview. This view balances mourning with joy that ensures both the living and the deceased find closure and peace. The central aspect of this ritual is the recitation of the *Kacharhe Alun*, an epic oral history, and this narrative portray the ancestral migration passages and the realm they traversed. The recitation of this epic by the *Charhepi* is key for the soul's navigation through the afterlife. This oral tradition is pivotal for guiding the soul of the deceased to the ancestral realm, ensuring peace and rebirth.

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