

Folk-beliefs of the Karbi Tribe in Assam

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Abstract:

Chomangkan is a funeral rite of the Karbi tribe. There are three types of Chomangkan, first of which is the Kanphlaphla. This type of Chomangkan is a three-day event. The common people of the Karbi tribe observe this particular Chomangkan. Moreover, since Chomangkan is a very expensive festival, the Karbi people residing in the plains normally celebrate the first type of Chomangkan. According to their customs, the Karbi community guides the soul of a deceased member to heaven during the Chomangkan and according to their beliefs unless this Chomangkan is observed, the souls of the deceased wander around them or in the living world. Therefore, the Horlang, food items, and Tamul-paan (Areca nut and betel leaves) offered to the deceased during the Chomangkan is assumed to be accepted by the deceased soul. In addition to this the Jambili Athan, drummer, Usepi, Ovokpi, and the traditional dance of the young boys and girls are some major elements of the Chomangkan. However, it is to be kept in mind that there are certain differences in the observation of Chomangkan between the Karbis of the hills and Karbis of the plain. With the passage of time, the rites and customs of the three different types of Chomangkan; Kanphlaphla, Langtuk and Harne have become intermixed with each other. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the folk beliefs associated with the Chomangkan.

Key Words – Kanphlaphla, Harlang, Soul, Uspi, Ovokpi, Jambile Athan, Folk belief

Introduction:

Assam, the heart of Northeast India is the homeland of many tribes and communities and their unique cultures. Among these tribes, Karbi is one major tribe. They are also known as the Mikir tribe. The Mikir name is very ancient. According to Karbi thinker Rongbong Terang, “The “Mikirs” started to introduce themselves as “Karbis” to other communities from the 4th decade of the 20th century. The origin of the word “Karbi” could be different for different people.” (Axomor Jonojati aru Sanskriti, p. 236) According to Edward Stack, “The name Mikir is that given to the race by the Assamese. Its origin is unknown. They call themselves as Arleng in Karbi language which is “man” in general.” (Axomor Jonojati aru Sanskriti, p. 236) The Karbis belong to the Mongloid groups of people. They came from China-Myanmar road to Assam and settled here. A reference to their arrival in Assam is made by Kanaklal Baruah in the following way, “According to chronology we may undoubtedly accept this group of Tibeto-Burman speakers as the successors of the Khasi-Syntengs and perhaps the other preceding tribes like the Mikirs.” Baruah is of the opinion that the Karbis arrived in Assam before the 1000 A.D. (Axomor Jonojati aru Sanskriti, p. 236) At present, the Karbis are primarily settled in Karbi Anglong district of Assam, however, they are also settled in other districts like Sonitpur, Biswanath, Lakhimpur, Morigaon, Golaghat, Sivasagar etc.

The Karbis settle in villages. There are 5 major clans among the Karbi people: Teron, Terang, Timung, Inghi and Ingti. These major clans are again divided into several sub-clans. There are differences in the rituals and social roles according to these 5 major clans. The social life of the Karbi people is very well-planned, an example of which is seen in their various rituals and festivities. Among these festivities, Sojun Puja, Rongker Puja, etc are noteworthy. The rites and customs associated with the birth, death, wedding, etc. play a very important role in their well-planned social life. The role of their funeral rite Chomangkan is worth mentioning here. This paper attempts to discuss and analyze the folk beliefs and customs associated with the Kanphlaphla Chomangkan of the Karbi tribe.

Objective: The funeral rites of the Karbi people vary according to their social role and status in their community. This paper attempts to discuss and analyze the folk beliefs and customs associated with a particular funeral rite known as the “Kanphlaphla Chomangkan” of the Karbi tribe.

Method: In order to study about the “Kanphlaphla Chomangkanro” of the Karbi tribe, a field study has been conducted on the Karbi tribe in the Biswanath district of Assam. The data collected through this field study has been analyzed through descriptive method.

Sources: The Karbi people are settled both in the hills and plains of Assam. However, there are certain differences in the cultural practices between the hill Karbis and the plain Karbis. This study has primarily focused on the Karbis of the plains i.e. the Biswanath district of Assam. Along with this, help of different books have also been taken.

Analysis of the Main Topic: The “Chomangkan” funeral rite of the Karbi tribe is based on their belief in the soul after death. This rite is celebrated keeping full faith with the soul. There are generally three different kinds of Chomangkan among the Karbi people of the hills and the plains:

1. Kanphlaphla
2. Harne
3. Langtuk

The Chomangkan is celebrated depending upon the social status of the deceased person and his family. However, nowadays the three different types of Chomangkan are celebrated together. The Chomangkan of the Karbi is a very expensive and lengthy event. This event is celebrated for around three to four days. It requires various articles made of brass along with rice beer, pork, chicken and mutton. In the Karbi society, the family of the deceased discusses with Village Head and the elders many days prior to the event and they seek the counsel of the Village Head and others in every matter till the end of the event. Generally, the traditional drum and the drummer is main element in the event. The discussions of the Chomangkan are done along with the songs and the music of the drummer. Along with all these, the host family has to pay respect to the Usepi, Chaherpi, Ovokpi by offering them rice beer, betel nut and areca leaves and seek their permission to organize the event. The first day of the Chomangkan is to collect the ashes of the deceased and if a person dies suddenly then right before collecting the ashes a rite called Chamburuposhochingduk is observed by the family. It is worth mentioning that since Chomangkan is a very expensive event, therefore the Chomangkan of more than one dead person in the family is or can be celebrated together. Right before the collection of the ashes, taking the Pohoipi, Chahepi, Usepi, Ovokpi as the prime members of the group, a group goes to the cemetery. There, the Chahepi and Usepi mourn the deceased person by singing songs. The wood carried by the Usepi is kept in a specific place and amid the singing, rice is offered followed by water, betel nut and areca leaves to the deceased soul and the Ovokpi collects the ashes. The ashes collected are rubbed accordingly on the mannequins made of hay arranged in the host family. Then ash-rubbed mannequins are adorned with clothes and other belongings of the deceased and the mannequin/s is/are placed on a raised platform. On the second day of the Chomangkan, the scene of the actual day of the death is recreated, replacing the dead body with the hay mannequin placed on the raised platform. The entire day, the Chaherpi cries narrating the life-story of the deceased person. By the end of the day, the Usepi begins the rite of making a cloth “Pira” with red, white and black thread. That night all the invited guests of the village arrive at the host’s family and the young boys and girls perform the “Nimosh Kerung” dance that night.

Some Karbi people residing in the plains of Assam have started to ignore their traditional rites and customs after being Aryanized. Many people are of the opinion that they do so because the Chomangkan is a very expensive event. Due to the high expenses, most Karbi people residing in the Karbi Anglong district also prefer a communal Chomangkan. However, it is to be noted there are differences in how the Karbi of the hills observe this rite with that of the Karbis in the plains. The Karbi people of the hills do not use the “Jambili Aathan” during their Kanphlaphla Chomangkan, which is very much used by the Karbis of the plains. Actually the Karbis of the plain have mixed up the rites of the Kanphlaphla, Harne, and Langtuk Chomangkan in the present times. Some of the items like Chengsho, Banjar, Mirongrang are very much needed while celebrating the Chomangkan. There are some similarities in the Karbi traditions and the traditions of the Austric community. Especially, the installation of stones and rites of offering rice beer and rice to the deceased soul are common in both the communities. The word “Chomang” means God of death and “Kan” or “Kekan” means festival or dance, meaning that it is the festival of the death. These two words which are prevalent in the Khasi tribe fit perfectly while decoding the meaning of the word “Chomangkan”. According to the sociologists, there are certain similarities between the “Nimosh Kerung” dance form of the Karbi tribe and the Nongkrem dance form of the Khasi tribe as well as in the “Shomshinang” battle dance of the Karbi with that of the Pachtiech or Machtiech battle dance of the Khasis where the dancers of both the tribe used swords and shields. (Axomor Jonojati aru Sanskriti, p.168)

Faith and customs of the Chomangkan: The natural environment around developed some questions in the mind of the ancestors. And the failure to find answers to those questions lead to the people believing in the question and the suspense. It is to be kept in mind that there are many popular beliefs amongst the different tribes and communities of North-east India. Amidst these popular beliefs lie certain superstitions too. The Folklorists have divided these folk beliefs into many divisions. Alan Dundes have divided these folk beliefs into two types:

1. Conditions or Implementations
2. Results/Consequences

The Assamese Folklorist Nabin Chandra Sharma has divided these folk beliefs into three classes:

1. Sign folk belief
2. Magic folk belief
3. Transformed folk belief

The folk beliefs associated with the Chomangkan festival of the Karbi tribe can be placed under the magic folk beliefs. It is believed by the Karbi people that the soul of the dead person returns from heaven during the Chomangkan. If the soul is not pleased, there could be windstorms and heavy rainfall or any kind of mishaps could happen to the sacrificial goat or pig.

On the first day of the Chomangkan, small bamboo houses are built in the crematorium according to the number of the dead people and the doors are kept shut. There the food for the deceased are offered. On the last day of the Chomangkan, it is seen that the doors are open, which means that the souls of the deceased have participated in the event. Moreover the food offered to the deceased on the last day disappears from the place even if the young boys of the village stay as guards there. According to the Karbi belief, this is the proof of the deceased soul coming back from heaven.

Tamul Paan or Areca Nut and Betel leaves are the most essential item of Chomangkan. In the raised platform of the deceased (where the hay mannequins are placed), these Tamul-paan are offered according to the number of the dead people. In front of the same raised platform, two bowls are placed with rice beer and water respectively along with a ball of cloth. The guests who come for the Chomangkan offer Tamul paan and sprinkle rice beer and water on the hay mannequins. They believe that doing so would help the sins committed by the person while being alive is forgiven. The food for the guests who arrive in the host's family is provided by the villagers. According to customs, during the days of the Chomangkan, the host family has to fast during the day and eat just plain rice and lentils at night in order to help the soul to deceased to go to heaven. It is worth mentioning here that even if the Chomangkan for the deceased male and female is almost similar, the items offered to them are different. From the very first day of the Chomangkan, the Usepi sings mourning songs narrating the life of the deceased. These mourning songs are not sung anywhere else except the Chomangkan. The Karbi people also believe that when one woman teaches these songs to another woman, no one must listen to them. That is why these songs are taught in the middle of a field or in a place with no people around. The main person of this event is the Duhuidi, who is capable of maintaining the relationship between the soul's journey to heaven and the rhythm of the drummers.

Conclusion: The Karbi tribe belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese speaking communities. They do not have any written historical documents but there are some legends of this tribe that tell the origins of their ancestors. These legends also carry the history of Karbi culture and their oral literature. When looked into the scientific aspects of these legends, one can find the history of the Mongoloid community residing on the banks of Chiduin River. Moreover, one can find the names of many rivers of China in the Karbi legends. The descriptions of these rivers are found in versions of the songs that are sung during Chomangkan to help the soul's journey to heaven.

It is impossible to organize the Chomangkan without the help of the villagers. It also requires the permission of the Village head, priest, Usepi, Duhuidi, Ovokpi and other respected elders. The Janbili Athan is the cultural symbol of the Karbi tribe. It has direct relationship with the Chomangkan festival. The Chomangkan is a prime example of the Karbi culture. This festival also plays and has played a remarkable role in maintaining unity and prosperity in the Karbi society. However, due to issues related to finance, many people in Karbi Anglong has started to organize communal Chomangkan to provide a peaceful journey of the soul.

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7. Basic Information :
 - (i) Bapu Ram Kiling, age – 80 yrs.
 - (ii) Mancing Engti, age – 86 yrs.
 - (iii) Biren Kro, age – 60 yrs.
 - (iv) Terjan Kiling, age – 42 yrs.