

### CHAPTER III

#### **Karbis of Dimoria region and their prevalent folk beliefs and ritual practices**

All culture maintain beliefs that can be classified as folk beliefs or, common beliefs that are not necessarily grounded in scientific fact but are widely accepted as truth by most members of the group. Karbis of Dimoria region hold an array of folk beliefs. These can be seen regularly across them and are expressed in topics ranging from the weather to childbirth. Folk beliefs appear in many different ways within a culture. Some remain private and are known only within a group, and others take more public expression. Public folk beliefs often appear the form of proverbs or axioms that have become embedded in cultural conversation, or 'hard sayings'.

In theoretical perspectives the systematic study of folklore begins with the study of English Anthropologist and the German linguists after analysing customs, rules and regulation and cultural life of common people. Folklore has been defined by many folklorists in different ways. Folk beliefs play a important role as far as folklore of a locality is concerned. Therefore it can be said that folklore and folk beliefs are closely interlinked. Folk beliefs may help in shaping the folklore of a group of people. Their traditional knowledge helps to nourish their beliefs. Anthropologist E. B Taylor says that beliefs, customs and knowledge of a group of people had developed by a natural process and they have their roots in the primitive savagery. According to James Frazer the shared elements of religious belief and scientific thought, discussing fertility rites, human sacrifice the dying god, the scapegoat, and many other symbols and practices whose influences had extended into 20<sup>th</sup> century culture (Frazer, 1993). Frazer proposed that mankind progress from magic through religious belief to scientific thought (Frazer, 1993)

Primitive people had to live their lives with fear for all the natural calamities and the hazard that caused by nature. These fear made them to believe that there is one supernatural power. Every action owed itself to some supernatural causes. Under such belief, they tried to find out the origin of those activities. Their quest to know the unknown and hidden facts of nature might be something as far as the process of finding out the original super natural powers was concerned. On the other hand, primitive people felt the presence of power in all phenomena that results in the concept of Mann, a word, which suggest the presence of power in all objects (dutta, 2013).

There can be no dissension to the fact that the belief-system of the Karbis are the sum total of various socio-cultural, magico-religious rites and rituals, practices, customs and traditions propagated by a good number of great social philosophers and reformers in the bygone past who had left behind them a unique and rich cultural legacy for their future generation. One must but wonder to think that this unique and rich cultural legacy inherited from the past has been so long been continued by the community only through a strong racial memory in the form of different genres of oral literature. It is surprising to observe further that the act of continuation is achieved through a very simplistic means of oral tradition strengthened by recollection and practice, but in a very successful manner for centuries since time immemorial. All the belongings of this common yet complex belief-system prepare a common platform where religion, culture, and philosophy merge together and consequently give birth to a typical worldview of the people covering every aspect of their community life. However, with much pain we notice a deviation from that rich cultural heritage among the budding generation as well as some erring or disenchanted elders over the recent decades owing to various probable reasons.

### 3.1 Beliefs and myth related to origin of plains Karbi:

According to the informant Mr. Lohit rohang the karbis came to assam from the south side with the help of their three goddesses *behal be`*, *tumung lung sung* and *kling mekar*. It is said that the ancestors of the karbi came to north side in search of *Siklo Arni*( sun-moon), they wanted to confer a garland to *siklo arni*. The goddess of light, *kling mekar*, guides the people in the right path during this journey. *Behal be*, the goddess of culture, carries all rituals, culture etc in a bamboo vessel on her head and always reminds them about the culture of their own. And the goddess *tumung lung sung* is the symbol of bravery and courage that helped the Karbi ancestors to act brave as they found many difficulties and obstacles in the journey and sometimes they had to engage in fights with kachari king. After so many hurdles they cross the Kapili River and started living in Demoria region. they also found a big stone with the symbol *siklo* means sun and by conferring the garland they succeeded in their purpose.

There is one myth about the origin of Karbi art and culture, rituals came from, they believed that one day *yamraj* came to earth and mistakenly took the spirit of one Karbi man named *tumungmahar*. He was sent *yamaghar*( hell). When *yamraj* realised his fault he gave back the soul to *tumungmahar* body and the person after coming back alive he taught all the Karbi society what he learnt from the *yamghar*. So they believed that all the art culture and religious rituals are carried forward by him and that is how their culture came from the *yamghar*.

### 3.2 Religious belief of Karbis of Dimoria block:

Religious folk festivals and performances are observed and celebrated by folk people for the secure safety in near future. Some religious festival celebrated by Karbis are as follows:

Dehal puja: for the Karbi community, Dehal used to be a very big festival, over the years, it has become dehal rongker, and this is an annual festival that they celebrated with much respect and vigour. There is a process as to how the festival is held. The karbis living in the plains worship tamlong sarpo sarpe is their major deities in this festival. It is held for three days. Dehal puja is held on the first Tuesday of assamese *phagun* month. On the eve of dehal puja a community purification ceremony locally called *gaachiknowa* or *birkillut* has to perform and it is conducted by the *kathar*, the priest who perform purification ceremonies. Its main purpose is eradicating evil luck or preventing it from affecting the community. The place where the worship takes place is called *Dehal Ghar*. The men and women wear colourful attire on this day. They also involved in performing their traditional songs and dances. The community people offer animal sacrifice to their deities at night during this festival. They also pay homage to other deities. Usually, *Tamlong Sarpo Sarpe*, the main deity of Karbi is equated to Shiva and Parvati. The equipment required for the puja as well as the offerings and chanting of hymns represent the tribal links, for example, one pig, one goat, and a pair of fowl from each family are sacrificed, rice beer (*harbong*) specially prepared for the puja is offered, along with rice paste. A week before the puja they prepare *har* by fermentation of rice is which is done by the young ladies (*gavoru suwali*) of the village. But before that they have to perform local purification *gaa-chiknowa*.



Figure no 2: Dehal puja

**Baagh puja** is celebrated on the first Sunday of *jeth* month. According to them to get rid of tiger (*Bagh*) they perform this puja, after offering puja to *baagh-debota* they clean the nearby hills and begin their traditional process of *jhum* cultivation (*aarkor*). In this puja it is believed that consuming of the eggs of red ants (*amroli porua*) as Prasad which are collected from the forest is must. But other than that day consuming of these eggs are taboo.

**The bolia puja** is performed to get rid of risk from elephant. This puja is performed in the Assamese month of *ahar* or *jeth*. As it is related with the elephant so this has been identified with worshipping of *ganesha* – the elephant headed god. And it is also believed that it saves the crops from any kind of harm. Special varieties of pulses (*boot moong*), fruits, rice beer and hemp are offered. The other belongings includes earthen lamps, incense sticks, vermilion etc. The venue of this puja is the paddy field.

**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* (temple). It is also performed to supplicate

the gods associated with agriculture so as to avert any misfortune that might take place 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 floating 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, a lighted earthen lamp, flowers are placed along with vermilion, 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 performing ritual the people proceed to the local stream where the '*bhel*' is floating in the stream as an offering to the gods. This *puja* is conducted by the *Burha Bangthai* who gives a feast to the village folks in his house at his own expense after the rituals. To make sure the wellbeing for the year ahead for the entire community accompanied by happiness and feasting marks this festival.

### **3.3 Beliefs and rituals related to birth:**

Plains Karbis resided in different region of undivided Kamrup , Nagaon, Jorhaat, Shivasagar etc district they have some rituals and folk beliefs which are performed by them since the ancestral time. Among The different ritual practices and the folk beliefs prevalent in plains Karbi the beliefs and ritual practices related to birth and death are particularly significant:

1. *Harchi kikla*: according to the beliefs of plains Karbi in the time of birth of a child the experienced old women shouts "*nebak nebak*" all together. The reason behind this shout is to protect the new born child from the death which might occur from attack of wild animals and natural disaster.

2. *Anari kirat* (cutting of umbilical cord): after the birth of the child plain Karbi tribe starts the rituals of *Tarnuk* means cutting of umbilical cord through sharp bamboo blades. After the cutting of cord *kathar* the priest of the village decides a holy day for the purification of the child for that purification they prepare traditional Karbi drinks *Har* and other important stuffs. It is important to mention that the purification ritual should only be done by some *Ingti*, *Teron*, *Be*, or *Tumung*. The purification rituals aforementioned done by as follows: firstly, they make a square bamboo vessel of about one / two inch width. After sweeping the floor they draw a cross mark with rice flour and then place the bamboo vessel there in which the *kathar* (the priest) places a banana leaf and on the top of it they put *hanthor harmol*, *kih* and *kifek tenga*, *tita* etc.

And then the priest (*kathar*) chant mantras-

*Te hem hem hem*  
*apun achi,*  
*ee aangtar achi ee pusi*  
*nari kirat aafek kirat*  
*aabi kingjang aafek kingjang*  
*hem chuwa ret chuwa bitik chuwa*  
*din basi ju basi tun pangthir dang panther*  
*kathar siwan jamu siwan*  
*hanthor paad harmal paad*  
*ki'ho paad kifek padsi*  
*nangsikal attheye, nangsidol attheye.*

It means, I am purifying all the evils from the new born, different types food such as sour, sugar, bitter salty etc are collected, dear lord take it with heart and bless the newborn child.

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 restrain on the normal affairs.

After this the *kathar* pray to lord brahma. It is mentioned that this puja should be done in the time of the birth, if not then it should be done in before death. Because according to their folk belief a good death never comes to their life if they don't give this puja.

**3.4 Marriage related beliefs:** The Karbi marriage system is complex but interesting. They talk about two types of marriages –

- 1) Arrange or by negotiation marriage, and
- 2) *kangting* marriage by kidnapping or marriage by elopement.

Arranged marriages are of two types,

- (a) *harkhak* (*Dangor* or *Bor-biya*),
- (b) *bukabujam* marriage performed in the presence of close relatives that is why it is also called '*bapek make dekha raije nedekha biya*'.

In arranged marriage, the boy's family consisting of the parents and immediate senior kins visits the girl's family at least three times. On the third visit of both the parties discuss, fix a date and then decide on the ritualistic and practical matters of the solemnisation of the marriage as ritual items that the boy's party must present to the girl's side. Since the marriage is solemnized in the residence of the girl where the household gods(s) and any god(s) they believe needs to be worshipped / *puja*. The belongings for these has to be provided by the boy's family and the girl's family prepares and presents the list to the boy's family. This forms an important part as non-adherence to the list on the day of marriage leads to ridicule and humiliation of the boy's family. Specially the instruction to carry the *modorlau*<sup>1</sup> or harlung (rice beer), there are special processes to tie up the *modorlau*, they may be asked to tie the *modor lau* as *rithip*( a process to of tying *modorlau*) if it is not as instructed by the bride's



family then it a humiliation for the groom's side. Usually the bridegroom's party reaches the bride's place at night where they present the items they brought. After that girl's side invites the boy's side and their *khel* elders to visit them on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of marriage (*aath mongola*) and discuss the '*dai*' (a type of bride price) that the boy's *khel* has to give to the girl's *khel* for taking away their girl.

Then the girl is brought to the boy's place where she is cleansed with *birkillut* or *porachit* (purification rite) and then enters the house where she is kept in the main house accompanied by girls. By around evening the villagers and other guests come and are entertained accordingly, if it is *bor biya* then by pig feast or else by *hor*.

On the day of *aath mongola*, in both types of marriages the boy's *khel* elders arrive to discuss about the *dai*. The payment of *dai* is so important in inter-*khel* relations that in case of elopement of the girl, the boy's *khel* informs and sends invitation to the bride's *khel* to come and negotiate the *dai*. In earlier days this punishment or the *dai* was a pig or the value of pig, in negotiation the payment is much less. Nowadays, between two *khels*, the cash rate is fixed and this rate is fixed by both *khel* members deciding in a *Mel* or during the first attempt, when the ball was in the bride's *khels* court. This rate is then accepted whenever girls are exchanged from one *khel* to another this rate is to be paid. *Dai* is therefore different for different *khel*. As a result, marrying from one's own *Khel* is free of any *dai*. Also marrying (arranged or eloped) with a non-Karbi ordinarily does not lead to payment of *dai* until and unless the bride's side seeks to resolve.

Marriage by Elopement: If a boy elope a girl from same *khel*, it is not considered as a punishable offence. Also, if a boy brings a girl by elopement it is he and his parents who commit a "*duxh*" (offence) and not the girl.

In Karbi practice, the boy's *khel* elders send representatives to the girl's *khel* and on a scheduled date invite them to the boy's place. The girl's side then arrives and straightway do

not disclose the reason of their arrival formally. Rather, they would enquire whether some cows or birds from their village have strayed into theirs (boy's village). After such discussion, the matter comes up and then they seek the opinion of the girl as to what she wants. If she expresses her wish to stay back the alliance is accepted and *dondo* for having taken their girl is negotiated; a list of items prepared for the boy's side to give to girl's side and then invites the boy's side on a date set by them. Both boy and girl take *sewa* from the elders gathered there, *puja* is offered at *bor ghor* and sometimes the boy puts Vermillion on the girl also.



<sup>1</sup> Figure no 3: *Modor lau*

### 3.5 Death ritual among plains Karbis of Dimoria region (*thikarhi*):

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

Three types of death rituals prevalent in plain karbis, those are as follows-

1. *Taman tipri* – according to folk belief it is said that the one who died unnatural death is buried
2. *Theng eehong*- in this process the dead body is taken to the cemetery with the help of a bamboo, after performing some rituals they burn the dead body and the kin and the members of the family put one wood each upon the body of the deceased soul out of respect.

And there is one belief that they draw three lines on the way to their home while returning back from the crematory and chant the mantra like this -

*‘nang parnan damap, parni dampe,  
nang saman kaamprek ng,  
longpara wangdunenat.’*

It means from today your relationship with us has been broken; don’t follow us from now on.

3. If the person is a renowned personality in the particular area then the ritual is somewhat different, but nowadays every family follows this ritual to the deceased soul. 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.

On the tenth day of the death / *Doha* as they have termed it a ritual *Khar Maskhuwa* is performed. It is meant for the living, i.e. the immediate kin of the deceased who from now onwards can resume the intake of meat and fish, which so far had been abstained as a part of their mourning.

Karbi *Silputa* (erection of stones in memory of the deceased, a megalithic practice) ceremony observed within a year of the death as per their convenience. It is performed at the '*Long-ae*', a ground where *Silputa* is performed. On the day of the ritual performance a male kin of the deceased soul plays the role of a *Deo*. Two stones gathered from the hills are covered with a piece of white cloth known as '*sakatuk*', these are taken to the *Long-dang* and half buried in the ground. On this day the kins and neighbours are invited for a feast. Boiled rice, boiled potato, fish, fruits, cooked vegetables, betel leaves, areca nut, etc. are laid upon a banana leaf and covered with the *Sakatuk*. These are offered to the Gods. The women folk weep mourning the loss of the deceased. Finally, the guests are given a feast.

**3.6 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*** : it is also known as *Gaa Chiknowa or Ganga Snan (birkulut)* meaning flowing water, *Bir* meaning on the body of the person): It is the highest form and necessary to take up in the matter of serious offence such as, 1) Clan endogamy, 2) Marriage with Muslims and Christians. 3) Hitting a cow with a weapon, 4) Hitting a person of different religion.

A priest who may be a *Kathar*, a *Timung* or *Terang* (people belonging to these clans are entitled to be priest) may officiate in this ceremony. However, the same priest cannot conduct both the *Nari Kata Suwa* and *Gasikinuwa* ceremony. The priest is invited the day before the

occasion. In the early morning of the occasion the male family members has to collect certain particular types of grass namely *tibong*, *eengri*, *suwe* (some kind of sharp leaf), bamboo, *wati* (egg), *kusiakata* from the nearby hill and when the priest arrives by mid-morning all of them proceeds to the nearby stream. The priest places the grasses on the corresponding banks of the shallow part of the stream with the grasses inclined towards the stream creating a passage underneath over the water. The male family members then have to pass through this walking along the flow of the stream. After this, while they take bath in the stream the priest makes a *Hume* sacred fire out of dry bamboo and *dhuna* is from *juputi*. The men after their bath walks near this fire letting the smoke touch their bodies. After this all of them returns home where the priest then sacrifices two fowls. Before every sacred rituals *birkult* has to be done by Karbi people.



Figure no 4: The purification ceremony (birkullut or gaasiknuwaa)

**2. *Abangkipalut*:** 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 washing out of the body for every member of the village on the following occasions: (a) Before a Puja or funeral rite. It is mandatory for the head of the household and optional for other male members to clean themselves of all the wrongs that they may have committed without their knowledge.

(b) During every *Bihu* and community puja as *Dehal* to be observed by the males.

(c) After the 'village' chases away evil spirit from the village as after the *ai naam*.

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

### **3.7 Agricultural practices:**

The main mode of agriculture is still at the age old *jhum* the shifting cultivation it is known as *aarkur*. They have the close association with forest and observe the nature very closely and that way they develop some traditional folk beliefs. Accuracy of the folk beliefs signify their traditional knowledge is exemplified by the fact that the best time for agricultural activities and harvesting forest resources never escaped the watchful eyes of the Karbi people since time immemorial. Physical factors such as sun, moon, rain, length of the day and night, wind temperature are integral part of the folk calendars of Karbi. In a discussion with Mr. Lohit rahang, he informs that to see the activities of nature they can say that how the year will be. After the baagh puja as mentioned earlier they begin their traditional *jhum* cultivation (*aarkur*). That day each member of the village irrespective of both men and women participate in that process. They all sing *aarkura geet*.

### 3.8 Some other beliefs such as:

- Food plays an important role in Karbi culture. It represents prosperity, generosity, and community support. Hospitality is extended to visitors, who are usually asked to share a meal. It is believed that 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.
- If a dog or goat climb up to the roof of the house then it is supposed to be a bad sign (amangal) for the family.
- If *Yamdakini* or a owl sing abnormally near a diseased man house then it is believed that next day or the day after he will die. A Hen ('*Wo*' in Karbi language) usually never crow, if it crowing it is also supposed to a bad sign for the family, they immediately offer it to a *gorokhia* (cowherd) for the well being of the family.
- Weather related beliefs are common in Karbi society, some of such folk beliefs are that if the about 80% flowers of the tree *makari khal* (sal tree) falls upside down then there will be a drought in that year.

Again if chengeli mas (one kind of local fish) are found at large number during the time of *jeth/ahar* then it also believed that it is the sign of drought.

### 3.9 The Karbis Perception on supernatural world:

The cultural behaviour of health and the Karbi concept of disease are not free from their supernatural belief system. There are some beliefs rampant in the Karbi minds in the fact that when a disease does not cure to medical treatment, they think that the root of such problem is suspected to be due to supernatural factors. It is believed that different supernatural factors have distinctive nature of symptoms and causes such as symptoms like a feeling of uneasiness, loss of appetite, constant rise and fall of body temperature are believed to be

caused by supernatural factors. According to Karbi society of Demoria block, diseases caused by super natural forces can be categorised into the following types:

1. Power of evil spirit.
2. Black magic
3. Evil eye
4. violation of taboo
5. Sins committed.

Karbis believed that many diseases among them are caused by the influence of extra human agencies like evil spirits. They also believed that certain people have the power to throw a spell on others by just looking at them. The term used for evil eye among the plains Karbis is *Ame Keso*. The traditional belief is that evil eye has the worst effect on children and they are most subject to such spells. They believed that when a child is commented on his beauty or intelligence, he or she immediately starts growing peculiar symptoms like loss of appetites and severe nausea. The most effective treatment is performed by non inspirational diviner or

### **Healing rituals:**

some disease that caused by factors like environment, food and may more, conventional herbal medicines and modern biomedical treatments are considered to be appropriate. In most cases, different options of treatments are preferred as means of heal by the Karbis but for some particular types of diseases, specific types of cure are regarded as to be suitable. In Karbi society of *Demoria* region believed that jaundice is curable mostly by ritualistic means i.e. wearing of garland offered by *Bez*. On the other hand those illnesses caused by spirits, it is believed that magical spell are considered to be the only appropriate option of cure.

Like any other societies, preventive methods are taken against evil eye such as the practices followed by them i.e. children are made to wear black spot on their forehead *Ojah* or *Bez*.



*Ojah or Bez* is actually a male job. Various kind functions such as role of healer, priest, herbalist and sorcerer are performed by a *Bez*. A *Bez* is a specialist who can treat various types of illness like fever, intrusion of evil spirit, dysenteries and jaundice. Three interesting modes of practices are adopted by a *Bez* for the identification of a disease. In the first procedure, he picks some grains of rice and scatters them on ground. On the basis of the direction in which the grains fall, he predicts the cause of the illness. This procedure is called *Sang Kebang Abang* in Karbi dialect of kamrup district. Another process is the use of cowries by *Bez*. A handful of cowries are thrown on the ground to find the main reason of illness. Cowries with open shells are counted. If they are in majority, then it is considered as good omen. The third procedure is to feel the pulse of the patient like a doctor. Grains of rice, cowries, mustard seeds, basil leaves (tulsi) and fern leaves (dhekia) tied at one end (for wafting), amulets, herbs, threads of different colors like red and green to make a *jap* considered to be lucky by the villagers (it is generally worn round the arm), flowers, straw(dhanor kher) and akhoi are the things which are used by the *Bez* in order to cure the patient. Females are not allowed to take up this task (Das I. , 2003).

*Kobiraj*: is the specialist of herbal medicine. In spite of having belief on magical things they do not enchant mantras in their herbal medicine. A *kobiraj* learn the skills often from within the family. Usually the knowledge passed through father to son from generation to generation. *Kobiraj* kept their knowledge secret. They have the proper knowledge of surrounding environment. The forms adopted by a *kobiraj* for the treatment of a disease by feeling the beats of the pulse, body temperature and by observing the colour of the patient.