



Traditional Hunting Methods of The Karbi Tribe: A Deep Connection with Nature and Sustainability

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Abstract:

The Karbi traditional hunting methods reflect the deep connection of the Karbi tribe with their natural environment and their resourceful use of indigenous knowledge. These practices, rooted in centuries-old traditions, were developed for sustenance and protection. Karbi hunting practices are characterized by a diverse range of ingenious trapping techniques such as 'Pham dong' (Stamping trap) for birds or sometimes rodents, 'Pham Lut' (Ingressing trap) for animals, 'Pham Chetheng' (Self-beating trap) for untamable animal, 'Pham Riso' (Bow-like trap) for semi-aquatic bird, 'Pham Cheter' (Lightning trap) for elephants, 'Pham Arhang' (spiked pit trap) for boars and deers, 'Pham Derang' (Large pit trap without spikes) for capturing animals alive, 'Pham chek' (Caged trap) for catching doves, 'Pham Day' (Bamboo dashing trap) for birds and 'Pham Thok' (Rope-based trap) for wild hens. Each method demonstrates the Karbi tribe's ingenuity in utilizing bamboo, rope, and natural materials to construct efficient traps with a sophisticated knowledge of animal habitats and movements. While these methods were essential for survival and remain a part of Karbi cultural heritage, they are increasingly impacted by modern conservation laws and ethical considerations. This paper explores the skills, technical details and ethical implications of Karbi traditional hunting methods, highlighting the balance between tradition and contemporary wildlife conservation efforts. Through understanding these traditional practices, we gain deeper insights into the relationship between indigenous communities, especially the Karbi tribe and their environment, while also considering the need for sustainable and ethical wildlife management.

Key Terms: Karbi Anglong, The Karbi Tribe, Traditional methods, Hunting.

Introduction:

The Karbi tribe, indigenous to the North Eastern region of India, particularly the state of Assam, has a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with nature and the surrounding environment. For centuries, the Karbi people have relied on traditional hunting methods to sustain their communities and maintain their way of life. These methods are not just practical tools for survival, but also reflect the tribe's profound understanding of the natural world, its ecosystems, and animal behaviour. 'Ok Hung' (Hunting) in Karbi is not just a mere act of gathering food among the Karbis but also a ritualistic and communal activity tied to their traditions, beliefs, and festivals. Hunting is often done during specific seasons, ensuring that the reproductive cycles of animals are not disturbed, and the balance of wildlife is maintained. For instance, certain animals are avoided during breeding seasons to ensure their population remains stable. The Karbis also follow taboos and spiritual guidelines, such as offering prayers before a hunt and avoiding unnecessary killing, underscoring their respect for the lives they take. Hunting is often a communal activity for the Karbi tribe, involving extensive cooperation and planning. This collective approach not only strengthens social bonds but also ensures efficiency and the sharing of resources. The knowledge of traditional hunting methods is passed down through oral traditions and hands-on training from elder to younger generations. This ensures the preservation of their cultural heritage and sustainable practices. For the Karbis, hunting is intertwined with respect for the land and its creatures, emphasizing balance and preservation. By eco-friendly tools, seasonal hunting practices, and ensuring minimal disruption to the environment, the Karbi people maintain a sustainable relationship with the natural world, highlighting the significance of harmony between human and their surroundings. This deep-rooted tradition, passed down through generations, serves as a testament to the enduring link between culture, ecology, and sustainability.

While these traditional hunting methods played a crucial role in the Karbi people's survival, providing food and resources, they also hold cultural and social importance within their communities. However, with the advent of modern conservation laws and growing concerns over wildlife protection, the use of these methods has diminished, raising questions about the balance between preserving traditional practices and safeguarding wildlife.

The objective of this paper is to study and explore the indigenous hunting practices of the Karbi Community, a tribal group in Northeast India. This includes understanding their traditional knowledge, tools and techniques associated with hunting.

To analyse how hunting contributes to their livelihood and food security. It also includes assessing the impact of traditional hunting methods on biodiversity and the challenges faced due to changing policies, laws, and environmental conditions.

Methodology: To explore the traditional hunting methods of the Karbi tribe, a combination of analytical and qualitative methods were employed.

The methodology involved are-

- (i) Interactive group discussions were conducted in Karbi – dominated regions of Assam, especially in the remote areas of Donghap and Jikong Terang Villages.
- (ii) Information or data were also collected from books, journals and research articles related to the area of study.

Literature Review;

The Karbi tribe, predominantly residing in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India, exhibits a rich tradition of hunting practices deeply embedded in their cultural and ecological framework. Their traditional hunting methods have evolved over generations, reflecting their intricate understanding of the local environment, wildlife, and sustainable resource utilization.

Traditional hunting among the Karbi tribe is closely tied to their socio-cultural fabric, rituals, and subsistence strategies. According to Singh (2021), the Karbis’ engage in seasonal hunting activities, guided by a profound knowledge of animal behaviour, migratory patterns, and the forest ecosystem. This ecological knowledge, passed down orally, ensures the community maintains a balance between hunting for sustenance and conservation. For instance, certain hunting practices are forbidden during breeding seasons to allow wildlife populations to regenerate.

The Karbi hunters traditionally use tools crafted from locally available materials, such as bamboo and wood, supplemented by metal spearheads or arrowheads. Singh and Baruah (2019) highlight that the tribe employs traps, bows, and arrows for small to medium-sized animals, while larger game involves coordinated group hunts using spears and trained dogs. These tools are not only functional but also carry cultural significance, often being intricately designed and used during community rituals.

Hunting is more than a subsistence activity for the Karbis; it is also a cultural practice imbued with symbolic meanings. According to Dutta (2020), rituals and ceremonies often precede and follow hunting expeditions. The community performs offerings to forest spirits and seeks blessings for a successful and safe hunt. Such practices emphasize the spiritual connection between the Karbi people and their natural environment.

Men predominantly engage in hunting activities, while women contribute by preparing tools, preserving meat, and participating in associated rituals. However, as Singh et al. (2022) note, the tribe’s approach to resource utilization is collective, with the entire community benefitting from the spoils of the hunt. This communal sharing reinforces social bonds and ensures equitable distribution of resources.

Modernization, deforestation, and legal restrictions on hunting have increasingly challenged the sustainability of these traditional practices. Roy and Deka (2021) observe that many younger members of the Karbi tribe are moving away from hunting, opting instead for modern livelihoods. This shift has led to the gradual erosion of traditional ecological knowledge, raising concerns about the loss of cultural heritage.

Despite these challenges, the Karbis’ have traditionally adhered to sustainable hunting practices, such as limiting hunting frequency and refraining from overhunting. Studies by Baruah (2020) emphasize that these practices align with modern conservation principles, underscoring the relevance of traditional ecological knowledge in contemporary wildlife management.

In conclusion, the traditional hunting methods of the Karbi tribe exemplify a harmonious relationship with nature, rooted in cultural values and ecological awareness. Preserving these practices is essential not only for maintaining their cultural identity but also for contributing to sustainable resource management and biodiversity conservation.

Findings and Discussion:

List of hunting methods used by the karbis:

Sl no.	Vernacular/ Local name	English term	Material used	Specific purpose
1	Pham Dong	Bamboo Stamping trap	Bamboo stick and fine rope	To capture birds and sometimes rodent.
2	Pham Lut	Ingressing trap	Bamboo and jute rope	To trap animal especially porcupine.
3	Pham Chetheng	Self beating trap	Bamboo or locally available materials	To capture the animals which becomes untamable.
4	Pham Riso	Bow-like trap	Bamboo	To trap semi-aquatic bird like white-breasted water hen.
5	Pham Cheter	Lightning trap	Natural vine or rope and heavy rock or log	To catch Elephants
6	Pham Arhang	Spiked pit trap	Sharp bamboo or wooden spikes	To trap boar, deer and antelopes.
7	Pham Derang	Large pit trap without spikes	Only deep and steep pit is dug	To trap alive animals.
8	Pham Chek	Bamboo Caged trap	Bamboos are weaved into different size caged	To catch doves

9	Pham Day	Dashing trap	Bamboos are used	To trap birds
10	Pham Thok	Pecking trap	Rope-based mechanism	Wild hens or jungle fowls are targeted.

1. Pham dong (Bamboo Stamping Trap): The term ‘Pham dong’ does not have a direct English equivalent, as it is a specific traditional Karbi term referring to a type of bamboo trap used for hunting or capturing birds. However, in English, it can be described as a spring-loaded bamboo hunting trap, or simply a traditional Karbi hunting trap. The ‘Pham dong’ trap is a traditional hunting trap used by the Karbi people of Assam. It is an ingenious and eco-friendly mechanism designed to catch small animals like rodents, and birds, depending on its size and set up. The “Pham dong” trap reflects the Karbi’s deep understanding of their environment and their ability to use natural materials for hunting.

The primary material used for constructing the trap is bamboo, due to its availability, flexibility, and durability. ‘Canes or ropes’ are used to tie or secure parts of the trap together. The trap consists of a spring-loaded mechanism, typically involving a bent bamboo stick. When the bamboo-stick is bend forcibly and then released suddenly, it comes into its previous position with strong force and with this strong force this trap is made. The one end of the stick is buried in the ground for approximately one feet and the other end is fastened with a fine and smooth rope, which then bends the bamboo stick. The other end of the rope is made into a loop and is stuck with a specially made triggering device. This device is then camouflaged with some leaves and baits such as grain or corn is placed to attract the target. When the target touches or disturbs the trigger, the trap’s spring mechanism activates, capturing it instantly.

2. Pham Lut (Ingressing Trap): The ‘Pham Lut’ trap or the ‘Ingressing trap’ is likely a reference to the traditional hunting or trapping techniques used by the Karbi tribe. It is a traditional method, which is almost like a “Pham Dong” trap but the knotted fine rope is not placed on the ground but is rather hung in the track where the targeted animal frequently pass by. This trap is crafted by using locally available materials such as bamboo and jute rope. The ‘Pham Lut’ trap is designed in such a way to allow animal, especially porcupine to enter or ingress but prevent their escape. When the animal passes through this open or narrow opening knot, the hidden device automatically fasten the animal.

3. Pham Chetheng (Self-beating Trap): The ‘Pham Chetheng’ or ‘self-beating trap’, is a clever and effective contraption designed to catch both wild and domestic animals which becomes feral and unruly. The trap’s ingenuity lies in its ability to ‘beat’ or capture the animal automatically without human intervention once triggered. The more the animal tries to escape or move, the trap tightens and starts to beat against it, causing increased distress. The design and size of ‘Pham Chetheng’ trap may vary depending on the type of the animal targeted and the location where it is used. This trap is suitable for catching untamable or problematic animals, such as feral hogs, unruly cow, etc. The trap delivers a series of strikes or increasing force, discouraging the animal from further struggle. The mechanism ensures the animal remains immobilized until the trapper arrives. This trap is historically used in survival or hunting scenarios for untamable or dangerous animals. They are often constructed from locally available materials like bamboo and rope, etc.

Self-beating traps can cause significant harm and stress to animals, raising questions about their humane use. In many regions, such traps are illegal due to their potential to injure animals severely. Therefore, non-lethal traps or cage traps are recommended for human and legal animal control.

4. Pham Riso (Bow-Like Trap): The ‘Pham Riso’, a traditional Bow-like trap is specifically designed to catch semi-aquatic birds such as ‘Vo Kurvak’ (white – breasted waterhen). This type of trap leverages a spring mechanism often a bent branch or bow and a snare to catch the bird as it moves through or near the trap. This trap is typically made with a bamboo that is flexible and also acts as the “bow” or spring to create tension along with an arrow. This type of trap is effective for capturing ground-dwelling birds which is placed in a horizontal position. This trap is placed strategically at the same height as the bird, where the targeted bird naturally perches, forages, or moves around. The level positioning makes the bait easily accessible to the bird, ensuring it interacts with the trigger. The trap is camouflaged using surrounding Vegetation to make it blend seamlessly with the environment. This minimizes suspicion from the bird and maximizes the trap’s effectiveness. When the bird interacts with the bait, it disturbs the trigger mechanism which makes the bow automatically shoot the arrow to the bird.

When used responsibly, the bow-like trap can be part of sustainable and ethical bird capture methods, but it must be regulated carefully to protect both the birds and the ecosystem. Its use should always align with conservation goals, ensuring that the natural balance of wildlife population, is maintained for the long term.

5. Pham Cheter (Lightning Trap): The ‘Pham Cheter’ or ‘Lighting trap’, is a device used by the Karbi tribe is known for its speed and efficiency, as it captures or immobilizes the animal especially elephants, almost instantaneously, much like a bolt of lightning. This trap is made with a strong natural rope or vine, to which heavy rocks or logs weighing around 80-90 kilo grams are tied at one end of the vine. The log is suspended high up in a tree using strong ropes or vines. The rope is tied in such a way that the log remains elevated and stable until the trap is triggered. A trigger rope is stretched across a path frequented by elephants, usually animal trails or near water sources. The rope is connected to the mechanism holding the log in place. When the elephant walks through and disturbs the trigger rope, it releases the log. Once it is triggered, the heavy log falls from the tree with significant force, hitting the elephant.

Historically, such traps were used for self-defence against wild elephants that raided crops or posed a threat to their village. In rare cases, it might have been used for hunting or capturing elephants, though such practices are now illegal and discouraged. This method is highly dangerous and inhumane, often resulting in severe injury or death to the animal.

Modern conservation efforts strongly oppose such practices, emphasizing coexistence and non-lethal conflict management.

6. Pham Arhang (Spiked Pit Trap): The 'Pham Arhang' or 'Spiked pit trap' is a traditional hunting method used by the Karbi tribe. This method is designed to trap wild animals such as boars, deer, and antelopes. A deep pit is dug in areas frequented by animals, such as near watering holes, trails, or feeding grounds. The pit often includes sharp spikes made of bamboo or wood which is fixed at the bottom, angled upward. These spikes ensure that the animal is severely injured or killed upon falling. The pit is carefully concealed with a layer of natural materials such as grass, leaves, and twigs, making it look like part of the forest floor. Sometimes, food or other attractants are placed near or over the trap to lure the animals. When an animal steps on the camouflaged surface, it falls into the pit and becomes trapped. In some cases, pit traps with spikes are set up near agricultural fields to prevent wild boars from destroying crops. While this trap was a vital survival tool for tribe like the Karbi, they are now largely discouraged due to ethical concerns and laws protecting wildlife.

7. Pham Derang (Large pit trap without spikes): The 'Pham Derang' refers to a large pit trap without spikes, traditionally used by the Karbi tribe for hunting or capturing larger animals. Unlike the 'Pham Arhang' which incorporates sharp spikes at the bottom, the 'Pham Derang' is designed to trap animals alive without causing immediate harm. The trap consists of a deep, wide pit which is approximately 20 feet in width and 10 feet in depth. It is dug along animal trails or near water sources where animals are likely to roam. The pit is carefully disguised with sticks, leaves, and soil to blend with the surroundings, making it almost invisible to the approaching animal. Once the animal falls into the pit, it cannot climb out due to the steep walls of the trap. The hunters then retrieve the animal, either for food or other purposes. The absence of spikes minimizes unnecessary harm to the animal. It allows hunters to selectively decide the animal's fate.

8. Pham Chek (Caged Trap): The 'Pham Chek' is a traditional caged trap used by the Karbis' to catch birds, especially doves. It is a simple yet effective method of trapping birds without causing them harm. The trap is typically made of bamboo or other locally available materials. It resembles a small cage, with openings designed to allow a bird to enter but prevents it from escaping. For bait, food such as grain, seeds, or other bird attractants is placed inside the cage to lure doves or other small birds. The bait is strategically positioned to ensure the bird triggers the trap mechanism. The cage has a simple trigger system. When the bird enters to feed on the bait (grains), the mechanism is triggered and the door close, trapping the bird inside. The 'Pham Chek' is light weight and easy to carry, allowing hunters to set multiple traps in different locations. It is reusable, making it a sustainable trapping method for small-scale hunting. The Karbis traditionally use this method to catch doves for food. While the "Pham Chek" is a non-lethal and humane method of trapping, such practices are increasingly limited by wildlife conservation laws aimed at protecting bird population.

9. Pham Day (Dashing Trap): The 'Pham Day' or dashing trap is a traditional method used to catch birds. This trap is made typically of bamboo, where two pieces of bamboo is placed in a hanging position at the centre. Both the pieces of bamboos are hold together in such a way by fastening the pieces with traditional mechanism from its respective sides. To lure the birds towards the trap, grains are placed as bait. When the birds tries to enter between the two hung bamboo pieces, it gets dashed by the bamboo making the birds unable to escape.

10. Pham Thok (Pecking Trap): The "Pham Thok is a traditional wild hen pecking trap used by the Karbi tribe. It is designed to catch birds like wild hens or jungle fowls using a rope-based mechanisms that exploits the natural pecking behaviour of the birds. The trap is made of rope along with sticks and a small pit is dug to construct the frame. The rope is flexible and strong, often made from natural fibers. A loop is placed on the ground and attached to a springy stick or tensioned mechanism that can quickly tighten the loop when triggered. The bait usually grains or seeds is placed inside the loop to attract the wild hens, who begin pecking at the food, unaware of the trap. As the hens pecks or disturbs the bait, the rope loop tightens around its leg or body. The spring action of the rope and stick ensures that the bird is caught securely but not harmed. The "Pham Thok' is primarily designed to trap the bird alive for food.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the traditional hunting methods of the Karbi people embody a remarkable blend of cultural heritage, ecological knowledge and sustainable practices. These methods go beyond the act of hunting, serving as a testament to the Karbis' respect for nature and their commitment to maintaining ecological balance. By following seasonal guidelines, employing indigenous tools, and adhering to spiritual and cultural norms, the Karbi people demonstrates a sustainable way of life that prioritizes harmony with the environment. As modernization and external influences challenges their age-old traditions, preserving and understanding such practices is crucial for fostering a deeper appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems and their role in promoting sustainability. The Karbi traditions remind us of the timeless wisdom that comes from living in harmony with nature.

Acknowledgement: We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to the successful completion of this work on "Traditional hunting methods of the Karbi tribe: A deep connection with nature and sustainability". First and foremost, we extend our sincere appreciation to the Karbi community elders. Special thanks to Probhat Teron, Kamsing Ronghang, Biren Teron (Jikong Terang village) and Mondor Rongphar for all their help through out the study and also for generously sharing their knowledge, traditions, and practices, which form the foundation of this study. Their insights into their hunting techniques, and deep respect for nature have been invaluable.

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