



## Plants in Karbi Culture: Traditional Beliefs and Practices

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**Abstract:** The Karbis are one of the largest ethnic communities residing in the Karbi Anglong district, Assam of the northeast India. Their knowledge of nature, utilization for the various plants surrounding them for everyday purpose can also be seen in their traditional beliefs and practices. Their vast knowledge has made the karbi people quite adaptable to the hilly environment. Even though the present-day people have developed in every aspect of their life, but still the karbis go back to their ancestral beliefs when it comes to their traditional and religious practices.

Apart from the traditional and religious practices, the karbis also depend on natural resources for their food. Their traditional knowledge of local biodiversity has shaped sustainable practices for gathering food and fishing. The karbis employ plant based techniques to catch fish, showcasing their ingenuity and eco-friendly approach. This community also showcase their talents in handicrafts, as well as in using plant based natural colour.

**Key terms:** Karbi Anglong, The Karbis, Traditional beliefs, Plants

**Introduction :** Tribal communities around the world have many ritual beliefs and practices related to plants. From the very beginning, plants have provided to the various needs of man in matter of food, medicines ,livelihood and construction purpose. One such tribes is the Karbis, they are found to be residing in the hilly areas of North East India. They are found in the district of Karbi Anglong, Dima hasao, Sonitpur ,Nagaon, Lakhipur, Kamrup etc of the state of assam. Karbi Anglong is a hill district situated in the North East region, Assam and the geographical area covered by the district is 10,434 sq km while its geographical distribution is between 92°10'-93°50' E and 25°33'-26°35' N. The district comprises of two different areas- the western part, which is also known as Hamren sub division, and the Eastern part which comprises of Diphu and Bokajan sub division.(Basumatary, Teron and Saikia 2014) Though the karbis reside in different parts of Assam, their beliefs regarding plants, herbs, fruits etc are the same. As they are deeply rooted and attached with nature, they also meet their daily needs or requirements from it resource.

The karbi people are believe to be the worshipper of nature. At present most of the tribal communities, specially the karbis are still using their knowledge of wild and medicinal plants and even utilize it in their traditional beliefs apart from their medicinal use. The Karbis are animist in nature and they offer prayers to unseen and territorial beings and therefore, plants and animal play an essential role in all the religious ritual and ceremonies of karbis (Timung & Singh 2019)

Plants are seen as sacred and imbued with spiritual significane, with many beings associated with deities, spirits and ancestral worship. Their beliefs are woven in to their daily life's rituals and cultural identity. Sacred groves, known as 'Jirsong' are persevered as spaces for community worship and rituals. Certain trees ,like the banyan(Ficus Bengha lensis) and Sacred figs(ficus religiosa) are considered sacred and associated with deities and spirits. Plants are integral to various festivals and ceremonies, marking important life events such as Births, Marriage and Harvest. They are used in the preparation of food decoration and offerings during religious events.

Karbi Traditional beliefs in plants reflect a profound and multi-dimensional relationship between the community and nature, illustrating a world view where the natural world is not just a resource to be exploited, but a sacred entity deserving of reverence and respect. Plants in Karbi culture are not merely seen as sources of Food, Medicine and Materials, but as living symbols of the spiritual and metaphysical connection between humans and cosmos. These beliefs system shapes not only their daily lives and also their cultural identity, as many plants hold deep symbolic meaning tide to the Community's rituals, Cosmology and Ancestral heritage.

The integration of plants into religious and spiritual practices underscores the Karbi's view of the natural world as being imbued with life and spiritual significance. Sacred trees, Medicinal herbs and ritual plants form an integral part of ceremonies that affirm the community's bonds with the divine, the spirits of the land and their forebears. These practices are not only a reflection of respect for the environment but also demonstrate and intricate understanding of the healing properties and ecological balance provided by plants.

Furthermore, Karbi beliefs surrounding plants also showcase a deep-rooted sense of stewardship and ecological consciousness. The traditional knowledge passed down through generation regarding the use of plants for medicine and agriculture emphasizes the importance of sustainability and the careful stewardship of natural resources. These traditions not only offer a glimpse into the cultural richness of the Karbi people but also provide insight into sustainable living and biodiversity conservation that can inform contemporary environmental practices.

The objective of the paper is to study the specific flora (plants) of the region and to examine the relationship between the Karbi tribe and those plants surrounding them. It is well known that the uses to which the tribal people put the plants of the area, sometimes gives clues to new findings (De, 1968; Jain, 1964, 1972; Schultes, 1960, 1962). With this view the author undertook a study of the relationship of some selected plants with life and traditional beliefs of the Karbis.

**Methodology & Data Collection:** In this paper, Descriptive and Analytical method has been applied for the discussion of the topic. This study is based on Primary and Secondary sources.

Primary data will be collected through surveys and personal interview with some selected Karbi elders, specially those who were well experienced with knowledge of plants used in their traditional practices.

Secondary data were also collected from different books, journals and research articles which are related to traditional beliefs and practices of the Karbis with respect to plants.

### **Literature Review;**

**Rongpi, B. (2024).** The term 'folk culture' includes unity, tradition, and folklore, which is a collective combination of myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, ballads, folk song, folk dance, folk music, folk carvings, and so on. As language is the vehicle of culture, folk culture gets carried through generations orally for time immemorial. The Karbi are the early settlers of Karbi Anglong, a district in Assam which is a rich zone of biodiversity. They have their own folk culture which is associated with different ritualistic practices. They have a very rich cultural tradition, material culture, and folklore. The methods of transmission of folklore are purely based on listening to the songs sung by the singer, stories told by elders, and recitation of verses during Se-Karkli and other ceremonies. Different natural resources play a significant role in the livelihood and cultural traditions of the Karbi people. They have their own concept of ethno-ecology and indigenous knowledge which is sustaining their age-old ecological and cultural heritage, although the folk culture and folklore of the Karbi are facing a serious challenge and are on the way to gradual obliteration. Among the Karbi several rituals can be noticed which were performed collectively at the community level in the village. The people are intimately dependent upon nature for their sustenance. Such performances were not merely for their recreation, but they denoted their devotion to the supernatural power and agencies.

**Dhanaraju, V., & Bijeta, R. K. (2024);** The Karbi tribe of Assam as followed in the contemporary period. Karbi's belief system is seen in diverse forms of practices like animistic form, ancestral worship, and sacrifices to the unseen and territorial deities. There is no difference between the concepts of 'bad' and 'good' in Karbi society. Both the concepts of good and evil are attributed to various objects that enjoy the status of divinity. Supernatural power, good or evil, is extended to persons or objects. The core idea of Karbi religion is a dichotomous belief in both good (represented through expressions of god, deity, divine, etc.) and evil (represented through expressions of malevolent spirits, power, etc.; evil is a negative counterpart of benevolent forces), between which they always try to maintain a balance. The belief underlies the philosophical base of Karbi religion. For instance, Karbi believe in ancestral worship, for they believe that souls travel with the dead to a place that is neither hell nor heaven. Recently, some sections of the Karbi have started reforming traditional faith and practices which have resulted in the formation of religious cults like Lokhimon, Bhaktitom Trust, Hindu Honghari, Arlong Chehu, etc. in the community. However, in new cults, the beliefs and rituals continue to have their roots in Karbi tradition.

**Borah, P., & Banikya, P. (2023);** The Karbi people are one of the various ethnic groups living in Assam. The Karbi people also have their own culture. Their folk culture is especially rich. Folk beliefs and customs are belong to folk culture. This paper introduce the Karbi people of Assam. The main topic of this paper is to discuss the folk beliefs and customs prevalent in the Karbi Society.

**Das, H. M. (2023);** The Karbi is one of the most prominent tribe of North-East India. These Karbi people generally reside in hilly places and by the side of the river, which variously impacted their food habits. Rice, different leafy vegetables, meat, fish etc. are mainly included in their food habit. Generally they don't prefer to take oil and spices on their cooking; they prefer to take boiled food. Rice, meat, fish, vegetables etc. traditionally they put inside green bamboo pipe and then put the pipe in fire and boil the food. Both sour and bitter dishes are included in their food system. Meat and dry fish are much favoured by them. The Karbis who reside in the plain area are generally influenced by the food habit of the plain people yet their cuisine in most extent similar to their ancestor. Although their different traditional food items are served in different rituals and festivals yet the food habits of the present generation has changed. Under the influence of globalization they started using modern food habits by using oil, spices etc. Further they adopted the various food habits of other countries like the habit of eating momo, chowmin, roll etc. Again by reducing their local beer among they take tea, coffee and other such beverages.

**Rongpipi, R., & Dhanaraju, V. (2018):** Karbi tribe is one of the major ethnic groups in northeast India and especially in the hill areas of Assam. This paper intends to introspective of oral narratives of bamboo by drawing attention on the material culture and its role in socio-economic life of the Karbis in northeast India. It also explored the oral narratives related to mode of bamboo used by them as an important resource which plays an important role in the survival of their culture at present. Karbi culture is rooted in their oral traditions transmitted orally throughout the generations since they have no written source. In view of the fact that Karbis have deep roots in preservation of ecology and environment the plantation of bamboo is used to control existing imbalance due to inappropriate land use and over exploitation of natural resources.

**Teronpi, V., Singh, H. T., Tamuli, A. K., & Teron, R. (2012):** Traditional or folk medicine is still prevalent among the Karbis as means of primary health-care. Traditional medicine is not only a source of healing, but the practice is also an important part of their religion and culture.

**Teron, R., & Borthakur, S. K. (2013):** Plant medicines used by the Karbis for treatment and management of poisons, including food poisoning, is presented here. Method included rapid ethnobotanical appraisal, questionnairebased interview, group discussions with focus groups and personal observations. Both spiritual healing (rituals) and plant medicines are practiced to detoxify and manage poisons of plant and animal origin. Folk use of 54 medicinal plants belonging to 45 genera and 34 botanical families have been studied and documented. Selection of some plant antidotes have semblance with the popular concept of 'Doctrine of Signatures'. Folk medicines must be documented, validated and their practice be encouraged for the benefit of rural mass. Food-medicines overlap exhibited in many cultures can be an interesting area of investigation.

**Barua, K. N., & Baruah, B. (2021):** Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) refers to an informal system of knowledge gained by communities through an intimate connection with the environment and its processes. Out of all TEKs prevailing importance of gradually diminishing local herbal medicines among indigenous tribes needs reconsideration. Karbis is one of the indigenous tribe of Assam racially Indo-Mongoloid and linguistically Tibeto-Burman group, predominantly inhabitant of Karbi Anglong district. They believed to have a long association with forests and close observation of flora and fauna. Herbal remedies comprise an effective element of the health care system among the rural inhabitant. Extensive field survey was conducted in six blocks of East and two blocks of West Karbi Anglong districts during 2018 to 2021. Schedules are developed for in-depth interviewing folk medicinal healers to document all possible and existing traditional ethno medicinal information. During the study hundred six numbers of medicinal plants were documented which are used by Karbi healers for treating numerous ailments. Among them twelve plants were identified as priorities medicinal species which have significant value to discover modern-day drugs. Comparative analysis of utility of folk medicinal plants between Karbis and other tribes Bodo, Sonowal-Kachari, Mishing and Dimasas of Assam revealed that 38% similarity was found with Dimasa tribe might be their identical topography and free migration of knowledge. Plantation and conservation of medicinal plants by the traditional healer in their backyard will positively contribute to bio-diversity management also.

**Medhi, B. K., & Bhattacharjee, S. (2021):** Rice is one of the world's important food cereal crop and a main food source for more than a third of the world's population. It is one of the earliest domesticated plant in the context of socio-cultural evolution of human being. Rice is the prime staple food of entire South-East Asia, including India. It is the prime staple food of different ethnic groups and inhabitants of entire Northeast India as well, including the Karbis of Karbi Anglong in Assam. The prime objective of this paper is to examine the traditional method of rice cultivation as well as the cultural significance of rice among of the Karbis. Primary data were collected through empirical field work by using appropriate anthropological methods. The paper has analyzed in detail how rice is intimately associated with the cultural traditions of the Karbis. It has also discussed about the local varieties of cultivated paddy and their indigenous methods of preservation as well. It has been observed that the concerned people utilized a number of natural resources related to their traditional economic organization and food. They apply their traditional knowledge related to the collection and utilization of different natural resources and to prepare their food.

**Teron, R. (2005):** Bong, gourd shell (*Lagenaria siceraria* Standl.) is essentially an integral part of Karbi culture and regularly used during Adam-asar or marriage and worships. The seeds of bottle gourd are believed to have been gifted by a Karbi God, Songsar Recho, the creator to the ancestor of the Karbis and till today gourd seeds are considered as one of the assets of the tribe. Songsar Recho is also considered as the custodian of all crops. Investigation further revealed that before the introduction of Bong into Karbi society, a fruit of Nong-nong (*Thunbergia grandiflora* Roxb.) was used as Bong for storing *Horlank* or rice beer and leaves of Phle-phle (*Premna latifolia* Roxb.) were rolled into cones and used as *Lankponk* (traditional drinking pot made out of bamboo) during marriage. Probably it was a symbolic exercise performed by a learned Karbi to demonstrate the use of *Bong* during marriage. The present work enumerates data collected from Chinthong region particularly around Baithalango where gourd shells are believed to have taken its root

**Result and Discussion:****List of some plants used in karbi tradition-**

Sl.No	Specific Scientific Name	Vernacular Names	Parts of the plants used
1	Bis-Tendu Tree, <i>Diosphyros Cordifolia</i> Roxb	Ruthe	Fruits are used as poison to catch fish.
2	<i>Langenaria Siceraria</i>	Bongkrok	Fruits are used for various traditional activities.
3	<i>Baphicacanthus cusia</i>	Dukangda, Dukangku, Sibü	Juice of its leaves are used for tattoos.
4	<i>Croton Joufra</i> Roxb	Marthu	Leaves are used for making Traditional rice beer.
5	Bamboo Plants	Chek	Both the leaves and stems are used in marriage ceremony, festivals and worshipping.
6	Banana plant	Phengnu arong,Lothe,Lorob	Both the leaves and stems are used in marriage ceremony, festivals, worshipping.

**Ruthe (*Diosphyros Cordifolia* Roxb);** This is a kind of wild tree with small round shaped leaf. It bears fruits as the size smaller than tennis ball, which is used as poison for fishing in ponds or rivulet. The fruits are crushed by any means and is put it in the water and the water gradually becomes poisonous due to which the fish becomes feeble and weak. The karbis an indigenous community from the North East India, traditionally use certain plants or its parts for fishing which makes the fish paralyze for sometimes. Among such plants is 'Ruthe' plant's fruits which contains natural poison. Although these toxins are dispersed in water but it does not cause any harm to the environment. The active compounds in these fruits include alkaloids, which temporarily affect the gills and nervous systems of fish. The karbis use these methods as part of their sustainable traditional practices, keeping in mind that they only catch what is needed and minimize harm to aquatic ecosystems.

**Nong Nong, Bongkrok(*Langenaria Siceraria*);**The 'Nong Nong' fruits sometimes referred to as 'Bongkrok' is a kind of creeper plant used traditionally by the karbis, an indigenous tribe in North East India. The Preparation and use of such fruits in traditional activities may involve prayers or symbolic offering to deities. In karbi customs, natural resources like 'Bongkrok' are often integral to rituals and ceremonies. They symbolize harmony with nature and reflect the karbi community's dependence on their environment.

'Bongkrok' is widely used in karbi traditional rituals such as 'Chojun', 'Chomangkan', 'Seh-karkli', 'Vurmatha', 'Adam Asar' etc. Without 'Bongkrok' it is almost impossible to triumph over these activities. 'Nong Nong' fruit is not like a regular Brongkrok, it is smaller than the regular one. But as the karbis believed that before the creation of the bigger 'Bongkrok' by the God, they used it as a general 'Bongkrok'. But after the creation of the bigger one, its use has become very rare where it was not necessary. Depending on the occasion, the different sizes and shapes of the 'Bongkrok'(Bottlegourd) serve different purposes. The Larger one is preferred for the marriage ceremonies, whereas the smaller one is used for 'Seh-Karkli(Teron,2006)'.

**Dukangda, Dukangku, Sibü (*Baphicacanthus cusia*,);** Among the Karbis the 'Dukangda' also known as 'Dukangku' or 'Sibü' is a plant whose leaves are traditionally used in tattooing practices. This plant holds cultural significance as its juice is extracted to create a natural ink for tattoos as well as for dyeing the 'Pini' a traditional dress or skirt worn by the karbi women which is wrapped around from the waist to knee length. This extracted dark, natural dye is applied on the body, especially on the face forming a straight line from the Forehead, Nose, Upper lip and Chin. This traditional tattoo is applied especially by the karbi women when they attain puberty. In the present day, this practice is very rare to be seen as it is not so popular.

The traditional tattoo is applied by using traditional tools like needles or bamboo sticks. As this process is intricate, so it is often performed by skilled individuals familiar with traditional methods. Tattoos among the karbis are more than body art as they often carry meanings related to Identity, Social status or Personal achievements. The use of 'Dukangda' ink connects individual to their heritage and serves as a marker of tribal and personal identity. Tattoos also have spiritual significance, acting as protective symbol or expression of devotion to dieties.

**Marthu(*Croton Joufra* Roxb):** 'Marthu' is a wild plant which generally grows in the tropical country with long leaf, with approximately 10-12 ft high. The leaves of the 'Marthu' plant are an integral ingredient in fermenting rice to produce the traditional rice beer, which is actually deeply rooted in the culture and ritual of the karbi community. The process typically includes—firstly, the leaves of this plants are torn into pieces and is grinded roughly and which is then mixed with soaked rice and make a flat and round shape cake or yeast starter and are kept for drying in hay or straw. After 2-3 days of drying, the starter cake became hard. Meanwhile the rice is being cooked separately. The cooked rice is ladled out and then is laid on a large bamboo mat and the starter dried cake is sprinkled which is also known as 'Thab' in karbi. The mixed rice is then kept in a large pot for 2-3 days and then the yeast makes rice juicy and which then turns into rice beer

known as 'Horh alang' or 'Horlang' in karbi and the same rice beer can be made into alcohol or wine by the procedure of distillation.

The local beverage, known as 'Horhlang' is often consumed during Festivals, Ceremonies and Communal gathering of the karbis. The 'Marthu' leaves not only aid in fermentation but also add a unique aroma and taste to the drink.

**Chek (Bamboo plant) :** 'Chek' is the highest used plants by the karbis for multiple purposes with Ranges from daily use to cultural practices. These bamboo species are integral to their lifestyle, contributing to construction, Crafts and food. There are different varieties of 'Chek', some of them are 'Chek-Keme' (Bambusa Tulda), 'Chek-Sudo' (Bambusa Spinosa), 'Buloka' (Bambusa Balcooa), 'Chek Bangtang' (Dendrocalamus strictus), 'Kaiphoh' (Dendrocalamus Hamiltonii), 'Tereng' (Malocanna baccifera) etc.

The karbis used 'chek' in making different handcrafted item. The items made are –'ingkrung'(Sieve), 'Beleng'(a round bamboo tray), 'Khangra'(Basket), 'Hijap'(handfan), 'Hoton'(a kind of basket), 'Kongsin (fishing tool), 'Baibuk'(dustpan), 'Lumphlak'(Laddle), 'Tar'(mat). 'Chek' is also used for making traditional musical instrument like 'Pongshi' (flute), 'Kum-li-eng'(traditional violin), 'Cheng – kumbang'(musical instrument).

The karbi people also used 'Chek' for building their traditional house and fenching purpose. They build 'Hem Thengsong'(a house constructed with the floor also made of bamboo, which is higher than the ground), 'Hemtap' ( a large size bamboo tree top house), 'Derang' ( a smaller in size tree-top house).

During the olden times, karbi women used to carry water with bamboos known as 'The lang pong'( long bamboo pipe), the karbis also used a small size Langpong'(a glass size bamboo pipe) for drinking water, alcohol and tea and a medium size bamboo is also used to cook. 'Hen-up'(bamboo shoots) of a certain varieties are consumed and it is even fermented known as ' Hen-up Thor'. These fermented bamboo shoots are eaten raw as well as cooked with meat, specially with pork. These fermented bamboo shoot adds tangy and unique flavour to the meat. Bamboo shoots are sliced and fermented in bamboo container for weeks. It is also pickled with spices and is tangy and long- lasting accompaniment to meals.

When there is a death among the karbi community, the dead body is carried on a 'Dolah' which is a bamboo stretcher crafted specifically for funerary purposes. A 'Tar' (Bamboo mat) is also placed on the ' Dolah' to rest the dead body. The 'Dolah' not only serves a practical purpose but also reflects the karbi peoples deep respect for the dead. The used of the 'Dolah' illustrates the karbi peoples connection to their traditional and natural surroundings, as they rely on bamboo -a renewable resource-for such sacred practices.

**Phengnu Arong, Lothe( Bamboo plant):** The leaves and stems of 'Phengnu Arong' are used in every ritual of the karbis. Banana leaves are often used as food wrappers or natural plate in traditional karbi cuisines. The leaves are large and flexible, making them ideal for wrapping rice, fish other food items, specially during festivals and ceremonies. Even the stems of 'Phengnu Arong' are cut to used as a plate . The ashes of the banana leaves can also be turned into a liquid soda or alkaline called as ' Phello' in karbi. This 'Phello' is used to cook curries and it gives the food an alkaline taste which neutralizes the affects of spicy food. The karbis even loves to savour the 'banana flower' called 'Langdung' by boiling the flower which is known as 'ke-up' mashing it into a paste adding sesame seeds. The flower is also sometimes roasted call 'kephi'.

Banana leaves and stems are often used in karbi religious rituals and cultural ceremonies. The leaves are used to make offerings to God. It is also used to create decorative items or to serve food during karbi communal feasts. The ' Lorab', a kind of wild banana plant is generally used for wrapping purpose only, on the other hand, 'Phengnu Arong' or 'Lothe' is used in every purpose.

These wild and cultivated banana species are part of the biodiversity in karbi Anglong and are part of the local diet and culture.

**Conclusion:** The present study is to explore some selected plants used by the karbis in their traditional practices. Traditional beliefs in plants are a vital aspect of many indigenous culture blending Spiritual, Medicinal and Ecological understanding. These beliefs demonstrate a profound respect of nature, recognising the inter connectedness of human and plants. By preserving their beliefs and practices, communities ensure the sustainability for their environment and maintain a harmonious relationship with the natural world. The traditional beliefs in plants of the karbi people reflect a deep reverence for nature and its spiritual significance. Plants are not only seen as mere resources but also as sacred entities that are intimately connected to the karbi way of life. Through their cultural practices and spiritual, medicinal knowledge, karbis demonstrate a profound respect for the natural world, recognising plants as sources of life, healing and spiritual strength. These beliefs highlights the karbi communities understanding of the inter connectedness between Humans, Nature and the Spiritual realm. Sacred groves, ritualistic offering and sustainable harvesting practices are integral to their world view, fostering a harmonious relationship with the environment. Ultimately, the karbis reverence for plants reflects a timeless truth: human survival and spiritual well being are intricately linked to the health of the natural world. Their beliefs system stands powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of safeguarding the planet's botanical diversity for future generation.

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