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A DISCOURSE ON THE KARBIS OF ASSAM WITH REFERENCE TO THEIR INDIGENOUS BREW

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ABSTRACT:

Consuming brew is a part and parcel in the folk-life of most of the tribal communities of Assam. The Karbis, also known as Mikirs, is not an aberration. The brew they consume in their folk life is called Jorlang. As an indigenous drink it is prepared in a totally traditional way and has a lot of social, cultural and traditional bearings. Jorlang has not only social significance, but also plays a major role in all the festivals and celebrations of the Karbis. This particular drink is regarded as sacred and is offered to God before starting any festival - religious or social. It is a part of Karbi life and a lot of customary things are associated with it. It is prepared in some specific households for community drinking during occasions or celebrations. This paper is an attempt to analyze how this particular drink of the Karbis is prepared and have association with various aspects in the life of the Tribe.

Keywords: brew, folk-life, indigenous, Jorlang, Karbis, traditional

INTRODUCTION:

The Karbis are an indigenous tribal community Assam with their own language, culture tradition, customs and beliefs. They are generally found in the hills though some Karbis have settled in the plains. The plain Karbis are called as the Dumrali. Earlier the Karbis were normally known as the Mikirs. However, there is no evidence as to how the word Mikir originated. According to LA Waddell (Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley 29) and Edward Stack (The Mikirs 4), the Assamese gave them the name Mikir. The term Mikir is found nowhere in the folktales or folklore. The Mikirs prefer to call themselves as Karbi or Arleng, out of which the Karbi is most commonly used (Das

173). The connotation of the new ethnic term Karbi is ‘brotherhood’ (Mahanta 394). The literal meaning of Arleng in their own dialect means “the man”. Lyall (The Mikirs 4-5) is of the view that Arleng actually means a man belonging to the Mikir tribe and not a man in general, who is referred as ‘monit’ or ‘munit’ in their dialect. He states that the etymological significance of the name Arleng came from their forefathers who used to dwell in the hill slopes. So, they were known as Arleng or hill dwellers or Hillman. Mikir is a combination of the words ‘Mikiri’ i.e “hill people” opined Gemini Paul. There are various folktales and legends stating the naming of the tribe as Karbi.

The Karbis are a migratory group of Central Asia. They entered Assam in one of the many waves of migration along the various stocks of people speaking the Tibeto-Burman languages. Due to the unavailability of any written documents, it becomes very difficult to trace the history of the early settlement of the Karbis. The occasional references to the Karbis in the old chronicles and history are the only sources. But they are also not sufficient enough to serve our purpose of tracing the chronological events of the Karbis. Their folktales and folklores come to our rescue at this point. There are many tales relating to the migration of the Karbis. But most of these deals with the in-flow and out-flow of the Karbis in their present habitats. These tales point to the fact that, the Karbis first lived in the eastern part of the Khasi-Jayantiya Hills. But as they were unable to establish any good will with them, they entered the Kachari kingdom and reached Dimapur. Here also they could not reside for long with the Kacharis. So, they again left that place and entered the Ahom kingdom, where they lived peacefully. The tales showed that the Khasis, Kacharis and the Nagas confined the Karbis to a limited geographical area due to their dislocation. They were found to change bases within that limited geographical area and later established themselves at Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and in the plain of North Cachar, Golaghat, Nagoan, Sonitpur (near Biswanath Chariali) and Kamrup districts. Some of them are still settled in the Jayantia Hills of Meghalaya and in Nagaland.

LANGUAGE:

According to Lyall, the Karbi language belongs to the Indo-Chinese speech called “Tibeto-Burman”. Grierson (Grierson) considered it as a member of the Naga-Bodo sub-groups of the Tibeto-Burman group. The Karbi language has absorbed numerous words from the Bodo, Kuki-Chinese and Assamese in its vocabulary. This is because of their migratory nature and close socio-cultural contacts with them. Many Karbis are seen to accept the Assamese language as their lingua-franca though within their community they use own dialect known as Arlenganun. It is interesting to note that they do not have a script of their own. Nowadays they are seen to use the Roman script to express the sound of their language.

RELIGION:

Karbi religion is a crude form of Hinduism. The Hindu Karbis call themselves as Hanghari (family man). Their assimilation with the Assamese has made them Hindunised. Their supreme god

is Arnam Sansar Recho (creator of the universe). They are polytheist and strictly believe that some gods are malevolent and some are benevolent. Hence to appease them they sacrifice hens, pigs and goats along with home-made wine *Jorlang*. Instead of idols, temples or shrines the Karbis believe in fetish or pieces of stones called *bor*. A section of the Karbis have also embraced Christianity.

CLAN DIVISION:

The patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal Karbi society is sub-divided on the basis of their regional habitation into four main endogamous groups. They are

1. Chintong
2. Ronghang,
3. Amri and
4. Dumralii.e. Those who live in the plains.

Each group is again divided into various clans and sub-clans, which are locally called as Kurs.

There are five clans which are as follows

1. Terang,
2. Teron,
3. Lekthe or Inghy,
4. Ingti and
5. Timung.

All these have sub-clans (Hakasam 39) and are exogamous. Endogamy is also practiced. Cross-cousin marriage is generally preferred. The Karbis practice and prefer monogamy though polygamy is allowed in rare cases.

CULTURE:

Culture gives a proper identity to a tribe or community thereby helping it to establish itself as a distinct tribe or community in the society. Culture finds expression in the form of customs, tradition, rites and rituals, folk beliefs, festivals etc. followed by a particular tribe or community. Different folklorists have defined culture differently. From the definitions of different anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists and thinkers it can be said that culture of a community means the overall way of life of the people belonging to that community which has been living in a particular geographic region for a long period. Culturally the Karbis are very rich. They celebrate a number of festivals where they follow their traditional customs, practices and rituals. As they are an agrarian society Domahi Kekan or Hecha Kekani. e. harvest festival is their main festival. As this festival is celebrated in the spring season it can also be called as a spring festival. Some of the other festivals celebrated by them are – Chomangkan, Rongker P, Dehal-Kachir-Dom etc. These are community celebrations. They take traditional snacks socially along with *Jorlang*, the traditional home-made drink. *Jorlang* is an inseparable part of any Karbi celebration whereby they offer it to

appease their gods and goddess for they regard it to be auspicious.

JORLANG:

Jorlang, the indigenous brew of the Karbis of Assam is prepared in a totally traditional way and has a lot of social, cultural and traditional bearings. It is the life of any Karbi celebration. Some specific households are selected for its preparation for community drinking during occasions or celebrations. Normally the village headman's house is selected for this purpose and only the women folk of the community are allowed to prepare it. The men folk never prepare it for community drinking or for celebrations. But nowadays a shift is seen in its traditional preparation method and the men folk are involved in its commercial production.

Local or home-made drinks, in any tribal society have utmost importance and the Karbis are no exception. Without it life does not operate smoothly and becomes limp. In any social gathering if the community is not offered with drinks then it is like committing a serious sin. All the members or invited guests are to be provided and supplied drinks. So, the community members always take care to see that enough supply of homemade drink is available in their households. It is seen that before any discussions, casual or serious, it is customary to offer drinks. Only after sipping the drinks the members participate in the discussions. It is also customary among the community members to offer drinks to any guests visiting their households. But nowadays due to assimilation some community members are seen to hesitate to follow this customary tradition with the outsiders especially.

Jorlang has not only social significance, but also plays a major role in all the festivals and celebrations of the Karbis. This particular drink is regarded as sacred and is offered to God before starting any festival - religious or social. It is a part of Karbi life and a lot of customary things are associated with it. Religious festivals like Chomangkan, Sokeroy, Ronger P, Johang puja and Dehal-Kachir-Dom becomes irrelevant without giving the offerings of *Jorlang* to the worshipping diety. Let us take the celebrations of Chomangkan, the death festival of the Karbis which can also be termed as a social festival as the whole society is invited to participate in it. In Chomangkan celebrations the spirit of the deceased is given farewell not by mourning for the departed soul but by merry making through dancing and singing of obscene songs by the youth of the community. This celebration requires a lot of preparation on the part of the family which is going to arrange it and it is customary to invite a professional weeper or aasepi to mourn for the departed soul. So, the particular household has to prepare *Jorlang* at a large scale for each and every guest in advance without which the celebration will be incomplete. Chomangkan is celebrated for four days with various rites and each rite requires *Jorlang*.

METHOD OF JORLANG PREPARATION:

The basic thing necessary in *jorlang* preparation is *bakhor*, the medicine which helps in fermenting and giving flavour to *jorlang*. *Bakhor* is a mixture of various locally available herbs like

bih-dhekia leaves (polypodium sp.a variety of fern), *basak* leaves (adhaqdavasika, a kind of medicinal shrub), seeds of tit-vekuri (solanum nigrum), jackfruit leaves, pineapple leaves, sugarcane leaves, *goruветai pat* (clarodendramvistum) etc. which are grinded together and then mixed with grinded rice powder. The combination of the herbs varies from place to place sometimes. The mixture is then made into flat balls and kept for three days. After three days they are exposed into the sunlight to dry for a day or two. These balls are dried in an indigenous method. They are kept in a big bamboo sieve covered with a piece of cloth and then with dried hay. The sieve should be kept on the ground and not anywhere else. After the required time is over the dried medicinal balls called *bakhor*, which are white in colour are ready for use. Normally two big balls of *bakhor* are used for a kilogram of rice. But for commercial purpose they use smaller balls.

For *jorlang* preparation rice of any variety can be used. As the first step of its preparation rice is boiled and this boiled rice is allowed to cool so that it can be touched with bare hands. Then *bakhor* is mixed with the cold rice and it is ready for fermentation. This rice is kept in a big container, called *mathi*, for a minimum of three days in summer and for more than six days in winter for fermentation. It is seen that sometimes the Karbis mix rice husk with the medicated rice in order to make it less sticky. The fermented rice is called as *jugli*. A cylindrical bamboo strainer called *jenga* or *har-arū* is inserted in the *jugli* where the *Jorlang* is collected after the required time is over. Automatically an intoxicating aroma comes out from the *Jugli*. For commercial purpose they do not keep *jugli* for such a long period. Normally they keep it for two days only. The *jorlang* prepared in this way is butter coloured. The *jorlang* is kept in a wooden container called *soroh* from where it is served to the guests either in bongs or in *laahonsi*. e. bamboo glasses. This yellow coloured *jorlang* is raw or *kechajorlang*.

The *poka* or Ripe or distilled *Jorlang* is colourless like water. There is a separate method for its preparation. Here the *jugli* is mixed with water in a big aluminum container. On top of it another earthen container with holes in its bottom is put and then it is sealed with either mud or with pieces of cloth so that the *jugli* cannot come out of the first container. Inside the second container another small earthen pot is put which is again covered with an aluminum container containing cold water. Now all the containers are put on the fire so that the water mixed *jugli* boils. When the *jugli* boils, vapors pass through the holes of the second container, hit the bottom of the fourth container and then cool down for coming in contact with the fourth aluminum container containing cold water. As a result, condensation takes place and the liquid automatically gets collected in the third container. While preparing distilled *jorlang* it should be kept in mind that the water on the fourth container is changed continuously and never allowed to get boiled. After some time when enough condensed *jorlang* is collected in the third pot the fire is extinguished and distilled or ripe *jorlang* is ready for consumption. This *jorlang* is odourless, colourless and strong unlike the raw *jorlang*.⁸

The Karbis prepare both varieties of *Jorlang* for any occasion. *Jorlang* occupies such a significant place in the lives of the Karbis that in birth, marriage and death it is compulsory. When a child is born, he/she is given a drop in the mouth as it is regarded auspicious. Again, in case of marriage in all the rituals connected with it both the bride and the groom's parties are to present each other side with *jorlang*. It is also compulsory for the bride to bring as much *jorlang* as possible to her in-law's house in her first visit after marriage. After death, in the Chomangkan festival or death festival *jorlang* is compulsory. In all the festivals and celebrations *jorlang* holds a special place and plays a special role. In any celebration the elders and the younger of both sexes of the community drink *jorlang* together. There is no social bar or taboo regarding its enjoyment in the Karbi community.

CONCLUSION:

Any indigenous product holds a specific place in the culture of a tribe or community. It carries a lot of traditional custom, belief, rite and rituals associated with it. When such a product gets lost in the fast progressing and developing modern world, all the belief systems and customs, tradition, rites and rituals connected with it gets wiped out forever from the face of civilization. Therefore, it is high time for all the concerned people and tradition lovers to act fast and do their bit in preserving them. As an indigenous brew *jorlang* is an invaluable resource of the Karbi community. So, its method of preparation should be preserved and documented for the posterity.

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