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SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AMONG THE KARBIS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RONGKER RITUALS

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ABSTRACT:

Rongker, an annual winter ritual deeply rooted in spirituality, is celebrated as a thanks giving ceremony to the divine forces for their blessings and protection as well as plea for safeguarding the well-being of the entire villagers from harm and evil. The ritual, which blends spirituality with festivity by traditional dances, songs and feasts, holds immense importance as it serves as a platform to strengthen the society bonds and reinforce their connection with nature and the divine. This harmonious coexistence with nature is a cornerstone of their spiritual identity as reflected by the ritual, which also highlighted their commitment to preserve socio-cultural heritage while passing it on to future generations. This belief system is associated with offering prayers to the natural spirits and deities so that the entire villagers remain in peace and in balance with the spirit of nature and human.

Keywords: Rongker, Ritual, Deities, well-being, belief system.

INTRODUCTION:

The Karbis people are an indigenous tribe who form one of the major tribal communities of Assam, mainly concentrated in the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. Ethnically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group, and have their own unique culture and language. The Karbis are a clan-based society, being a patriarchal society; one of the most important aspects is the religion and rituals. They have mostly followed an animistic religion system which believes in the spirits and the nature. Their worldview integrates the spiritual with the material, and religion plays a central role in shaping their social, agricultural, and cultural life. Among the various rituals and festivals that the Karbis observe, the *Rongker* ritual stands out as one of the most significant. *Rongker* rituals being a part of the Karbi belief system is **s**ocio-religious ritual performed by the Karbis in every village in order to please the territorial deity or spirit and for the well-being of the villagers (Karbi Wordpress, n.d.). It is a community event associated with offering prayers to the natural spirits and deities so that the entire villagers remain in peace and in balance with the

spirit of nature and humanity (Tisso et.al, 2019). The rituals of Rongker generally used to observe annually, every three, fifth or ten years or when it is needed.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The study is primarily focused on these two objectives as pointed out below-

- To know the society and religious belief system of the Karbi Community with respect to *Rongker*.
- To know the significance of traditional *Rongker* ritual in the Karbi society.

METHODOLOGY:

The study was done in the selected rural areas of West Karbi Anglong district through purposive sampling using both structured and unstructured interviews. Primary data was collected through participatory method. Elderly men and women were selected to gather the required information for the study and secondary information for this study was grossly drawn from articles, books, Government websites etc. Data from both primary and secondary sources were used to gather insights to help understand the problem which was under study. Apart from participatory method, telephonic communication was also contacted to get proper information keeping in mind the nature of the study.

THE SOCIETY AND ITS RONGKER RITUAL PRACTICES:

India is an ethnically and religiously diverse nation. At the same time, being a widely diverse land of geographical landscapes, culture and religious practices differ hugely from one region to another (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024). In a multi-religious country where our tribal groups have their own indigenous belief systems, which are unique and are mostly built on particular ecological and cultural set ups. The majority of Indian tribes occupy wooded mountains and others locally secluded sites. Tribes are frequently categorized according to names that indicate their association with environment that is forests-dwellers, hill people, indigenous people. The socio-religious life of the tribal is intimately connected with the forest spirit and it is an inseparable part of their daily life. Roy Burman opined in 1982 that "directly or indirectly in the tribal mind forest symbolizes life in its manifold manifestations i.e. home, worship, food, employment, income and entire gamut. Tribal can in fact be regarded as children of forest. The daily life of the tribal people is closely related with their surrounding environment. The tribal culture has its own heritage and it is nourished in the lap of nature (Timung et.al, 2024).

The Karbi people are one of the largest tribal communities in Assam, and around 84.64% of them practice the traditional animistic religion known as *Honghari*. According to

their belief system, they hold that gods and goddesses are omnipresent and omnipotent, existing everywhere in nature. They believe that there is no separation between the spiritual and physical world. They believe that the spirits not only exist in humans but also in other entities of natural environment such as rivers, hills, rocks, soil, etc (Tissopi, 2020 ed). *Rongker* is a socio- religious festival celebrated by the Karbi tribe of Northeast India. It is a religious belief system which is deeply connected with the nature spirits and ancestors' spirit. Rongker is a ritual performed to honour local deities and seeks their blessings for the welfare of the village community. The specific gods and goddesses worshipped during the Rongker, as well as the timing of their offerings, vary from one village to another. However, the worship of *Hemphu, Mukrang, Pirasinja* and the deity of *Longle A hi-I* are common.

TYPES OF RONGKER:

1. **Havar Rongker or Than Rongker:** *Havar Rongker* is an annual religious festival performed during the winter season usually during the month of January or February or at the beginning of Jhum cultivation. This *Rongker* ritual is conducted to appease the territorial deities, promote the welfare of the village, and repel malevolent spirits threatening the inhabitants. The process of *Rongker* ritual start with the villagers meet at the village headman home to discuss the festival's details, including who will offer sacrifices to the deities by offering the animals and who, how much and what will be contributed by the villager for the ritual. The meet would also discuss the date and time and the role of individual villager to perform their duties in the ritual. The night just before the day of *Rongker,* people in the villages gather in the house of *Rong Asar* (the village headman) and performed *Se ka Sadi* (a rituals giving prior information to the deities and asking for their presence in the following day). On the morning of *Rongker* festival the *Kurusar* (priest) and villager gather in the house of *Rong Asar* and give a small offering to the *Tirim,* the ancestral spirit. From there, they move to the place of *Rongker* ground which is further away from the village. All the peoples including the elderly men, women and youths gathered at *Rongke*r ground, where the *Kurusar* (traditional priest) started preparing *Dovan* (raised blocks of mud as altars for offering sacrifice). The *Kurusar* wearing new clothes (*seleng*) sat in front of *Dovan* to perform the animal sacrifice. Before the sacrifice was made the *Kurusar* invoke the names of the regional deities and perform the ritual. During the rituals, the traditional priest (*Kurusar)* and elderly men performs prayers and offerings to the deities, spirits and ancestors and seek blessings for the well-being of the entire village. Earthen altars are decorated with

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gourds of rice beer and other items to represent the deities. All the sacrifices are made in the names of the deities, except for the deity *Bamon,* who is vegetarian. After the sacrifices, the *Kurusar,* the religious specialist, predicts the village's future by examining the hearts and intestines of the sacrificed animals. The rituals conclude with a communal feast in that particular day (Tisso,Timung& Singh, 2019).

2. **Pirda Rongker:** *Pirda Rongker* also known as *Ronkerpi* (annual great *Rongker).* This *Rongker* ritual festival is performed by the people of some villages for the wellbeing of an area or cluster level to live in peace and harmony (Engtipi., Dhanaraju,2020).
3. **Vophong Rongker:** *Vophong Rongker* is a type of *Rongker* ritual performed every three years at the mouza level. This ritual typically lasts for three days. On the first day, the main *Vophong Rongker* ceremony takes place. On the second day, the rituals known as *Menu Kiri* (a ritual that recount the mythological origin of paddy in the Karbi society) and *Huni Kiti* (a ritual perform to ward off the evil spirits from the society) are performed. On the third day, the *Menu* (paddy) is distributed among the villagers (Tisso, et.al., 2019). The process for the successful celebration of *Vophong Rongker* is similar to that of *Havar Rongker*. Prior to the ritual, a meeting is organized by the villagers to discuss various matters related to the ceremony, such as fixing the date and deciding the amount each villager will contribute. The ritual begins on the night before *Rongker* with the *Kasadi,* a ceremony in which the deities are invited to attend the main day of *Vophong Rongker*. On the day of *Rongker*, the *Kurusar* (priest) begins by chanting the ritual hymn, known as *Arnam Taram*, at the altar of the deities. Following this, the priest and his assistant perform the rituals, which include the sacrifice of animals for each of the deity.
4. **Dengja Rongker:** *Dengja Rongker* which is also known as *Dovanso Ronker* is another type of *Rongker* ritual and it is performed in order to get rid of man-eating tiger of the surrounding area. This ritual is performed once in every 5 or 10 years at the cluster level jointly along with the contribution of all the people of that area (Tisso, et.al.,2019).
5. **Tongrop-Tongso Rongker:** *Tongrop-Tongso Rongker* means suddenly on immediately. Thus, this particular type of *Rongker* is performed during emergency to get rid of all evil happenings such as natural calamities, ethnic clash, violence, disaster or outbreak of diseases etc. Unlike the other types of *Rongker*, *Tonso-Tongrop* has no specific time or date to conduct the ritual propitiation. The ritual is conducted only during emergency calls or when it is needed.

6. **Ajo Rongker:** *Ajo Ronker* is performed during the night and the ritual is celebrated at the village level. This ritual is done collectively with the help of all the people in the village in order to protect their territory from epidemic diseases such as small pox, diarrhea, cholera etc or to protect from evil influences

Now a day, apart from the religious ritual's transformation has been taken place such as traditional dances, indigenous games, and musical entertainment are performed showcasing their rich spiritual traditions and cultural favour. It is an important community religious festival of the Karbis, holding a specific socio-cultural-religious aspect. Here, the spirit deities are invoked for protection of family, animals, plants and the overall community.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RONGKER RITUALS:

The Karbis view *Rongker* as a crucial socio-religious rite that has a significant impact on the socio-economic, political, and cultural aspect of the people. This ritual is deeply connected with nature spirits and ancestors by offering a fowl for each deity, the priest also offered goat and pig to the deities for the welfare of the villagers. The primary goal of the Rongker Karkli Ritual is to satisfy the territorial deities in order to safeguard the village or region from diseases and other natural disasters, to guarantee the welfare of the people, and to have a productive farming season during that time. Since from the time immemorial, the Karbis believes that by performing *Rongker* rituals, they can connect with the nature spirits and ancestors. Therefore, the *Havar Rongker* ritual is performed every year to protect oneself from evils and sicknesses in the village seeking the mercy of *Hemphu* (the almighty) and so that everyone can cultivate and prosper. It is during *Rongker* that all the misfortunes and hardships are believed to be buried and seeking *Hemphu* for peace and prosperity in the village. The elderly men of the village assisted by youths perform *Rongker* by offering animal sacrifice to the deities. It believes that the villagers will enjoy tranquil, prosperous lives with good health, favourable weather, and a bountiful crop if the deities are pleased. These rituals are community prayer with a view to satisfying the deities so that evils can be driven away from the society and will protect the harvest and the villagers. For the well-being of the family members, the Karbis conduct rituals once or twice in a year involved with the villagers collectively (Gohain, 2020).

CONCLUSION:

The religious practices play a very important role in day to day live of the Karbi people. They have a very special connection between the nature and the world of deities and spirits. *Rongker* ritual is a significant socio-religious festivals of the Karbi community

primarily observed in the Hills districts of Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao in Assam. The ritual is deeply rooted in the Karbi believed system and its ritual emphasizes the intrinsic connection with nature, where spirits are believed to inhabit nature elements such as rivers, hills and forests. Various forms of *Rongker* rituals such as *Havar Rongker, Pirda Rongker, Vophong Rongker, Dengja Rongker, Tongrop-Tongso Rongker,* and *Ajo Rongker* are celebrated at different intervals and context ranging from annual to emergency spiritual intervention. Each type of this ritual involves elaborate communal participation, animal sacrifices, offering and prayers led by traditional priest (*Kurusar*) aiming to ward of diseases, evil spirits. In contemporary times, *Rongker* has evolved to include cultural expression such as traditional dances, games and music, preserving and showcasing the Karbi heritage. The *Rongker* rituals continue to play a vital role in the socio-cultural, economic and religious life of the Karbi people, strengthening community bond and reaffirming their spiritual relationship with nature. It may be mentioned here that in the recent year even though the KAAC has declared 5th January as the day for *Rongker*, some of the villages are still following their old routine and perform the same on 5th February. With no holiday declared, people faced difficulty in attending the annual event. But recently, the State Government has declared restricted holiday on 5th January so that the community did not need to worry choosing between the annual community ritual or being present in their respective work place or the students can also witness and seek blessing on this very auspicious occasion.

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