

The Language of Ornaments: An Anthropological Insight Into the Ethnic Ornaments of the Karbis of Assam, India

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North Eastern region of India enjoys a place of pride in the whole of the country for its immensely rich assembly of tribal cultures. Among the prominent tribes of the region are the Karbis who possess unique traditions and cultures distinct from the other tribes. The Karbis are fond of ornaments and since the ancient day they have been using natural objects as ornaments, silver ornaments are used extensively by them. Preparation of different kinds of ornaments occupies an important part of material culture of the Karbis. Ornaments with distinctive colour, motifs, and designs not only reflect the cultural identity of the Karbis but are also indicative of the possession of rich cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. In this present endeavour, an attempt has been made to delineate the ethnic ornaments of the Karbis of Assam, India, along with the motifs of the designs in it which stands as one of the integral aspects of their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Karbis, womenfolk, ethnic ornaments, designs, motifs

Introduction

Ornaments quench the insatiable need for decoration that men have since their love of beauty is innate. People use it as an accessory to enhance the appearance of clothing or other items of apparel. Ornamentation is among the pristine and most frequent cultural practices of mass society that could be cited as an expression of human creativity (Glaveanu, 2013). Despite the common misconception that personal adornments are only trinkets worn to accentuate one's appearance, each piece of jewellery can reveal a great deal about the owner's socioeconomic position, gender, religious views, and cultural background. As a result, jewellery, like clothing or costumes, serves a wide and varied purpose. The ornament is the art that people add to their aesthetic art. Joyce (2005), Kazhgaliuly (2003), Nikolenko (2013), and Wadley (2001) mentioned ethnic ornaments have not only adorning value but also convey broader aesthetic meanings of the social, cultural, and identity of ethnic groups and individual wearers in a particular society. Kuhn and Stiner (2007, p. 42) said ornaments are things that we put on our body parts and clothes as signs indicating our personal, religious, and economic identity. Cristiani, Farbstein, and Miracle (2014, p. 21) said that personal ornaments, used by most if not every contemporary human society, are widely recognized as non-verbal means of social communication. Their visual appearance conveys and broadcasts different meanings such as self-embellishment, objects to trade or exchange, markers of age, gender, or social status, signs of power, etc. We can learn about an area's ecological adaption through its

ornaments since they reveal the resources and raw materials used to make them. Jewellery has long been associated with ostentation and affluence. Roy and Medhi (2005, p. 195) mentioned that the art of weaving and ornament making is exclusively reserved for the female. She uses these items as a vehicle for expression for her cultural imaginations and experiences. She reflects her imagination in the form of motif of varied forms drawn from various sources imbued with cultural imagination, meaning, and ethos.

The traditional costumes' function of demonstration of ethnic, regional, and national affiliation, costume designs, motifs in cultural context, and various aspects of visualisation of ethnic identity in costumes have been thoroughly studied and continue to interest modern researchers both in the general and ethnographic sense, as reflected in the works of Elwin (1959), Basu (1961), Stack and Lyall (1972), Majumder (1980), Mills (1980), Forney (1981), Bordoloi (1982; 1984), Forney and Rabolt (1986), Gordon (1987), Hamilton (1991), Kaiser (1993), Durham (1995), Eicher, Roach-Higgins, and Johnson (1995), Jirousek (1997), Roy (1997), Wadley (2001), Taylor (2002), Lurie (2000), Biswas (2003), Dogbe (2003), Kazhgaliuly (2003), Allman (2004), Crane, Hamilton, and Wilson (2004), Xu, Shim, Lots, and Almeida (2004), Joyce (2005), Roy and Medhi (2005), Hopkins (2006), Endle (2007), Kuhn and Stiner (2007), Yongyan (2009), Teron and Borthakur (2012), Glaveanu (2013), Nikolenko (2013), Cristiani, Farbstein, and Miracle (2014), Playfair (2016), Zemfira (2016), Akdemir (2018), etc. The Karbis, one of the scheduled tribes of Assam, also have their own indigenous costume pattern which stands as the unique identification markers of their own and the heritage of the culture of Assam in general. The various indigenously prepared dresses and ornaments, motifs of the designs and their integral relationship with the surrounding ecology and environment, indigenous loom and pristine ways of preparing the apparels, and so on, distinguish them as important representatives of a culture. In this present endeavour, an attempt has been made to study the indigenous costume patterns especially the ornaments, of the hill Karbis in the rural environment of Assam, India. This immaculate heritage of weaving and ornament-making has been passed down from generation to generation and plays an important part in the socio-cultural lives of the indigenous rural population. Assamese handloom products or ethnic outfits have a distinct identity due to their diversity, texture, theme, design, colour, and workmanship.

The People

The Karbis, formerly referred to as Mikirs, are a significant indigenous group residing in the hilly regions of Assam, India. The Karbis are dispersed across the Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivasagar, East Karbi Anglong, and West Karbi Anglong Districts of Assam, as well as the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. However, their presence is primarily focused in the Karbi Anglong Districts of Assam. According to Stack and Lyall (1972, p. 4), the Assamese people named the race "Mikir", although the origin of this name remains unexplained. They identify as Arleng, a term that signifies the concept of humanity as a whole. From a racial standpoint, they are classified as belonging to the Mongoloid ethnic group. Linguistically, they are part of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Historically, the Karbi people have primarily inhabited hilly regions, although due to various factors, they are also found dispersed across flat terrains. Within Karbi society, there exist five distinct clans, namely Inghi, Ingti, Terang, Teron, and Tumung. Every clan is subdivided into multiple sub-clans. The primary economic activity of the Karbis revolves around agriculture, with a special focus on jhum cultivation.

The Karbi men possess exceptional expertise in the art of crafting baskets using bamboo and cane materials. The bamboo implements they prepare are winnowing fan (*beleng*), sieve (*ingkrung*), carrying basket

(*hak/khangra*), hand fan (*hijap*), mat (*tar*), measuring basket (*hatan*), cane box (*hak-marjong*), fowl cage (*vo-um*), cow bell (*chainong-aleks*), automatic fishing trap (*langpong-ok*), lime container (*sainihem*), different loom implements (*mithong rang*, *therang*, *therang atot*, *kanti*, *thelangpong*, *whek*, *adang*, *thihu*, *bongsi*), etc. They also make wooden implements, among which stools (*ing-hoi*), mortars (*long*) and pestles (*lengpum*), and wooden loin loom implements (*kachibur atherang*) are prominent. In Karbi society, dry shells of bottle gourds are used as containers for different purposes. The bamboo tubes (*langpong/angkimung*) are used to carry and store water collected from the nearby water sources. The Karbis knew the art of making pottery on the potter's wheel. Today, this skill has almost vanished from their society. The Karbis also have their own indigenous blacksmiths (*hemai*) who have extensive knowledge of iron smelting. Jhum is their mainstay, though some of them have taken to permanent cultivation.

The Karbis adhere to animism as their religious belief, while elements of Hinduism are evident in certain aspects of their worship of gods and deities. Arnam Sansar Recho, Hemptu, Peng, and Arnam Kethe are among the animistic deities revered by the Karbis through their traditional rites. According to Bordoloi (1982, p. 2), the Karbi understanding of death is essentially based on three factors: the eternal nature of the soul, the existence of an afterlife, and the process of reincarnation. The Karbis have the belief that deceased souls inhabit a distinct realm called Chom-Arong, which translates to "the metropolis of the ruler of death". The Karbis partake in a complex ritual called chomangkan to ensure that the departed soul is granted a place in the realm of the deceased. In contemporary times, a significant number of individuals have embraced the Christian faith.

The Karbis have their own customs including attire, decorations, dances, music, and folktales. The women make their traditional attire by weaving it on a loom. All Karbi families are heavily involved in the handloom industry, despite the fact that agriculture is the main source of income. Not only are weaving and spinning popular techniques among them, but they are integral aspects of their daily lives and culture. As a result, in Karbi society, a lady who is not proficient in weaving is unimaginable. The decorations and traditional clothes worn by the Karbi people are clearly recognisable; they are beautifully crafted and a legacy of their ancestors.

Back strap loin looms are used to weave a wide variety of clothing items, such as *pini*, *pekok*, *vamkok*, *jambili*, *jamborong*, *poho*, *seleng*, *maflar*, *choi hongthor*, *jir-ik (bapi)*, *pi seleng*, *kapor*, *pilu*, *jeso*, *pisarpi*, and so on. Beautiful designs of native plants and animals, as well as items like umbrellas and hand fans (*hijap*), an aeroplane, and some abstract figures, are frequently embellished on traditional clothing. Similar to other hill tribes in India's northeast, the patterns are geometric in nature. Every article of clothing serves a particular purpose in society and, as such, embodies a person's cultural identity. Notably, traditional clothing did not feature the traditional wood craft, *Jambili Athon*, which is thought to symbolise the five pure clans of the Karbis. This indicates that weaving skills were acquired well before *Jambili Athon* appeared in the Karbi universe.

Objectives

The present research endeavour was designed to study the ethnic ornaments among the Karbis living in interior rural environment with special references to their pattern of ornaments as personal attires, the preparation and division of labour associated with it, the designs of the ornaments and their motifs, and the contemporary changes that incurred due to acculturation with other neighbouring ethnic groups and the impact of modernity.

Micro Field and Methodology

For this study, the trinkets from Taradong, a medium-sized Karbi village in the East Karbi Anglong District of Assam, India, were chosen as the base village for gathering empirical data. It has been less affected by modernity and still maintains its original customs, way of life, clothing, beliefs, etc. It is about 22 km from the nearby town of Bokakhat in Golaghat District, Assam. Sixty people who are very knowledgeable about the Karbi community's ancient customs, traditions, art, and craft gave information about traditional ornaments, including the different kinds, their names in the community, and the different styles that are used. To do this, a lot of personal interviews, in-depth talks, and case studies were done with traditional craftsmen and some of the village residents who knew a lot about their beautiful ornaments. Also, information about how modern ornament designs affect people and what facilities and options are available in the village, as well as how people feel about accepting these changes, was gathered by talking to both male and female residents of the village and its staff, including an in-depth interview with the main ornament makers of the village. The information gathered from one or more sources is checked against information gathered from other informants when needed.

Results and Discussion

The use of ornament plays a significant role in Karbi personal attire. According to Basu,

Man's love for the dress is related to his taste for ornaments. Living in the lap of nature the tribal people have to fight against nature for their existence. They were really afraid of the elements of nature. The innate fear complex that they had was probably the origin of their personal adornments. The desire for decorating the body is immense with the womenfolk. (1961, p. 46)

The Karbis have a variety of personal ornament with specific designs derived from natural and objects that exist, which is experienced by their aesthetic mind. The Karbi womenfolk are fond of ornaments. Among them the silver ornaments outnumbered the gold ornaments: the use of rings, silver bangles, a kind of heavy bracelet (*roipengkhar*s) and necklaces (*lek*) of various types. *Leks* are made of silver coins and colourful beads. *Lek-pengkhar*a (red-bead necklaces joined by silver pieces), *Lek-pengmui* (red and blue bead necklaces with designed silver pieces), *Lek-pingjiri* (silver necklaces), *Ban-mela* (necklaces made of big silver beads), *Lek-siki* (necklaces of multicoloured beads and silver coins), *Lek-yaikom* (multicoloured beads inserted through three threads to make a three lined necklace), *Lek-pila* (necklaces of big beads of orange colour and pieces of *eri* (*Philosamia ricini*) clothes) are some of the necklaces worn by the Karbi womenfolk. The Karbi men too wear *Leks*, made of gold. The *Leks* that men wear are *Lek Ruve*, *Lek Sobai*, and *Lek Manduli*. Many of these ornaments are unfortunately no longer found among the Karbis of Assam.

The Karbi women used to wear bracelets called *Roi*. A variety of *Rois* are in use such as *Roi Pengkhara*, *Roi Ke-er*, *Roi Kelok*, etc. Another traditional attire of the Karbi female consists of 24 number of silver rings, wearing three in each finger of both the hands except the thumbs. The rings that Karbis wear are known by the name *Arnan*. *Arnan Ke-et*, *Arnan Kelop*, *Rup Bonda*, *Ser Bonda*, and *Vokapardon Arnan* are some of the rings that the Karbis wear into their fingers. The Karbi priests wear *Armans* made of copper only. On the ear lobes, the Karbi women inserted silver tubes (*Na-thengpi*), bamboo tubes (*Langpong*), suspending ear ornaments (*No-jong-chai*) and on the upper part of the ear few gold or silver ear-rings (*No-rik*) are suspended. Again, there are different types of *Na-thengpis*, viz., *Thengpi angrong katengbai*, *Angrong kangchim*, etc. The Karbi menfolk also wear ear ornaments called *Norik* made of gold or silver.

The ethnic ornaments occupy a significant place in Karbi socio-cultural and material life. It has a heritage of its own and the Karbi people used it since time immemorial. Different ornaments were used by both men and women to adorn themselves. Some of the available ornaments of the Karbis of the study village are as mentioned below:

Lek

The Leks are ornaments worn around the neck. Silver or gold coins, colourful beads, were used to make different kinds of neck ornaments. They wear *lek sobai*, *ser alek pongting*, *lek pengkhara*, *lek ruve*, *lek bonghom*, *lek waikom*, *lek manduli*, *lek jingjiri*, etc. *Lek ruve*, *lek sobai*, and *lek manduli* are worn by men. Many of these ornaments are no longer found. Some of the available *lek* ornaments in the study areas are as follows:

Pisarpi Lek. It is a beautiful necklace (Figure 1) put on by the young girls during festivals. This ornament is worn by the Karbis along with *pini* and *pekok*. These necklaces are made up of a beautiful combination of red, black, and white beads. The plastic thread in which the beads (*aamu*) are inserted is known as the *hi-e-ajeng*. The lock present at the ends of the necklace is known as the *Kepenghip*. The thin elongated attachments suspended from the main chain represent the elongated flower of betel leaves known as *Bithiangrong*.

Achetok Lek. It is a beautiful ornament (Figure 2) put on by both young girls and married women during festivals. This chain can be worn along with *pini*, *pekok* and also with modern casual dresses. The hook present at the end of the chain is known as *kepawar*. This type of chains is made up of various colours of beads. These beads are used to make different colours of flowers and these flowers are joined with a string to make chains. The designs in the chain represent a wildflower that blooms in the evening and shrivels during the day. This flower is known as Longleanphar in Karbi. These flowers are found in nine different colours; they are pink, yellow, orange, red, white, light blue, dark blue, golden, and black. Thus, the *Achetok lek* resembles the beautiful Longleanphar flowers.

Lek Lo So. *Lek lo so* (Figure 3) is a traditional ornament worn by the Karbi females during the festivals. The necklace is made up of red, black, and white beads along with two shapes at the middle which is made of wood. The red large beads at the middle which are parallel to each other symbolize their traditional musical instrument *Cheng*.

Choikiding Lek. This chain (Figure 4) is adorned by the young girls with traditional as well as with modern casual attire. It looks almost similar to that of the *Achetok lek*. The flowers made up of small beads symbolize the beautiful *Longianphar* flowers. The hook present at the end of the chain is known as *Kepawar*.

Lek Hiki. This is an ornament (Figure 5) worn by the Karbi women during marriage and other festivals. The necklace is made up of red and black beads along with one rupee coins knitted with it. For the display of wealth, different coins are used. Coins of one rupee, 50 paisa, and 25 paisa are used for making these types of necklaces. Depending upon the capability and the economic status of the woman, coins are selected accordingly.

Lek Sika. This is a characteristic ornament (Figure 6) worn by the Karbi ladies during marriage and other festivals. The necklace is made up of red and black beads with silver coins attached to it. The coins attach to it are the 25 paisa coins, so it is named as *Lek sika*. Different types of coins are used to make this type of *lek*. Depending on the capacity and the economic status of the woman, coins are selected accordingly.



Figure 1. Pisarpi lek.



Figure 2. Achetok lek.



Figure 3. Lek Lo So.



Figure 4. Choikiding lek.



Figure 5. Lek hiki.



Figure 6. Lek sika.

Pekok Apin

This is a kind of ornamental pin (brooch pin) that is fastened to the *pekok*. It is worn during marriages and festivals. The *pekok apin* is designed with small beads to look more attractive.

1. The designs of the safety pin (Figure 7) with three white beads at the base symbolize the paddy flower and known as *Chak apu* in Karbi.

2. The designs of the safety pin (Figure 8) with pink and green beads symbolize the flowers of betel leaves and known as *Bithiangrong* in Karbi.



Figure 7. *Pekok apin I.*



Figure 8. *Pekok apin II.*

Roi

They are kinds of bracelets worn around the wrists called *roi pengkhara*, *roi ke-er*, *roi kelok*, etc.

No Thengpi

These are ear ornaments. Their different types are *no Thengpi angrong katengbai*, *angrong kangchim*, etc., worn by women, while *norik* was worn by men made of gold or silver. The ornaments are worn by both the male and the female to adorn them. Women's ornaments are mainly made of silver.

Arnan

They are rings for the finger. *Arnan ke-et*, *arnan kelok*, *rup bonda*, *ser bonda*, *vokapardon arnan*, are some of the *arnans* used by the Karbis.

The Karbis are betel nut consumers like other ethnic groups of Assam. The older women use a small mortar to grind the nuts to suit their weak teeth. Since most old women carry such a mortar (*Kove Longtok*), the usual definition of ornaments can be widened to include this ubiquitous accessory. Some old women use silver *Kove Longtok* for the purpose. Karbi women carry a small silver box (*saini hem*) to store lime. A small spatula is attached to it with a chain for the ease of taking out lime when taken with betel nut. Both Karbi men and women carry a small knife. The one that women carry is called *Nokek* or *Tari*. These weapons usually have handles made of ivory or buffalo horn and are decorated with coins. The knives that men carry are larger in size than those used by women called *Nokanti*, have ivory handles, and are also decorated with silver coins, etc.

Various forms of deformation, more especially marks on the skin, such as cicatrices, tattooing, or painting, may be made in order to identify the individual, and thus they have a social meaning. In some cases, totem representations, conventions, or symbols indicate the clan of the individual, and may thus serve as a warning against incest. In some cases, marks may have a tribal meaning (A Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1967, pp. 233-234). Among the Karbis in ancient times there was a custom of tattooing of the womenfolk which occupied an integral place in Karbi social structure. They apply tattoo mark into their faces which is known as *duk*. It is a tattooed line on the face of women which runs from the forehead to the chin through the nose and upper lip. If a woman after attaining puberty remained untattooed, then the priest, village headman, even the old man refused to take food offered by her. The *duk* also symbolically represents a girl who has attained puberty and is eligible for nuptial ties. Bhattacharjee, Rongpi, and Beypi (2018, p. 25) said that “*duk* by the young girls literally means that she is eligible for marriage and is capable of attending to every household activity and social functions or activity”. Historically it was said that the concept of *duk* in Karbi society came during the time of Burmese invasions in Assam which inflicted inhumane oppression on the people.



Figure 9. A Karbi damsel with *duk* (tattooed mark).

The Karbis took refuge in the deep jungles and high hills. In order to save themselves from the greedy eyes of the Burmese invaders, the young Karbi girls started to use a black line marking of tattoo that is *duk* into their face with a view to making them look ugly. But in later period the concept of *duk* (facial tattoo) was considered to be the idea of preservation of cultural identity. These practices of cultural identities still exist and carry by Karbi women.

Another customary fashion that Karbi women practised in the earlier days was blackening of their teeth. The practice was called *So-ik*. One of the ends of a wild plant's twig *phar-ik* is burnt on fire and the sticky juice comes out through other end which is applied to the teeth for this purpose. It was also believed to prevent from tooth decay. With the advent of modern preventive methods of tooth decay, this ancient practice has vanished from the Karbi society, but it still retains a symbolic place in their folk universe.

The Changing Scenario

The costumes of the Karbis have undergone remarkable changes. Instead of the traditional costumes some of them have adopted the modern western dresses. People of the younger generation are adopting some new style while the older generation still stick to their traditional design and colours. The contemporary trends of revivalism have made them conscious about their identity. It has been observed that the Karbi villagers have not hesitated to adopt the western style but they are not willing to change their own motifs and patterns of weaving. Among the villagers, the machine-made clothes seem to be in fashion. Once they kept long hair and made a knob at the top but now they used to keep short hairs like other ethnic people of Assam. Although the old style of ornaments has not lost popularity, yet the women seem to wear new style of jewellery or other modern fashionable ornaments which they are in fact, able to buy at low cost.

Traditional ornaments are widely popular worldwide in the present era. The conventional style that imparts a lacklustre and coarse vintage appearance is currently in high demand, particularly among those who appreciate the uniqueness of antique adornments. The tribes are embarking on a fresh endeavour to revive their culture, and the Karbis are also actively participating. There is a growing significance in reverting to the indigenous religious beliefs, social traditions, and customs. When it comes to comprehending Indian society and its social changes, tribes, which own their own unique language, culture, customs, and traditions, are often overlooked. Consequently, the valuable tribal heritage of India's northeast is confined inside the region's governmental boundaries. The Karbi culture remains largely unknown even to the rest of India. The Karbi instance is easily identifiable within the northeast region. The Karbis must acknowledge that outside of their location, the tribal culture of the area remains unexposed.

The Karbi fabrics and ethnic jewellery were prominently included in numerous fashion events, symbolising the rich heritage of the Assamese culture. The custom serves not only as a symbol of a tribe, but also as a manifestation of cultural identity, representing a distinct cultural heritage. The Karbis should effectively showcase their tribe's traditional heritage. Due to the effects of globalisation and modernization, traditional jewellery and adornment among the Karbis have experienced alterations in motifs, designs, and colours. However, there is also a simultaneous and opposing movement among them, which involves a return to their cultural origins. The promotion of tribal ethnic apparel and jewellery, namely the inclusion of the Karbis, is being encouraged. Furthermore, although the efforts to find and revive Assamese culture have been mostly effective, the emphasis on Karbi material culture has not gained much momentum. The study conducted here, with a specific emphasis on the Karbi ornamentation, has effectively established a comprehensive understanding of the tribal history of

the region. Those customary things that continue to be used in a Karbi household have also undergone changes over the years as per their use and need. The variations can be seen in attires and ornaments too. Since all of these elements come together to represent the Karbi ethnic identity, there is now an increased sense of awareness among Karbis that effort must be on to maintain their traditional dressing attires for continuity and usage; otherwise the very identity of the community will be lost in near future.

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