

End of the Year Report

Interpreting the Ritual Aesthetics of *Chomangkan* (Propitiating the Ancestors and the Spirits).

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Description of the Project

The Karbi community inhabits Assam, Northeast India. The Karbi community of Assam is known to have rich oral traditions. Nature plays a very important role in their tradition, culture, and creation of their belief. Due to their agrarian nature, they heavily depended on Jhum (slash and burn) cultivation and the forest for their sustainability. The Karbi celebrate many festivals, prominent among them are *Chojun* (lit. translates to eating and drinking or feasting generally, with the ancestors, deities and supernatural entities), *Rongker* (annual propitiation of village deities and territorial guardian entities of a given area or village), *Hacha-kekan* (harvesting festival), and *Chomangkan* (propitiating the ancestor spirits in elaborate funeral festival). Among these cherished traditions, *Chomangkan* stands as a poignant homage to the departed, a three-day ceremonial journey that traverses the realms of the living and the dead. Rooted in the belief of ancestral reverence, *Chomangkan* encapsulates the core of Karbi spirituality, offering a sacred pathway for the souls of the deceased to find solace in the land of their forebears – *Phu-Phi Arong*, the village of ancestors. As I embark on this journey to explore the ritual aesthetics of *Chomangkan*, I am drawn to the intricate symbolisms and motifs that adorn this festival. Within the fabric of *Chomangkan* lies layers of meanings, each symbol and motif imbued with profound stories and philosophical underpinning, often ignored or misinterpreted by contemporary observers.

Geographical Area

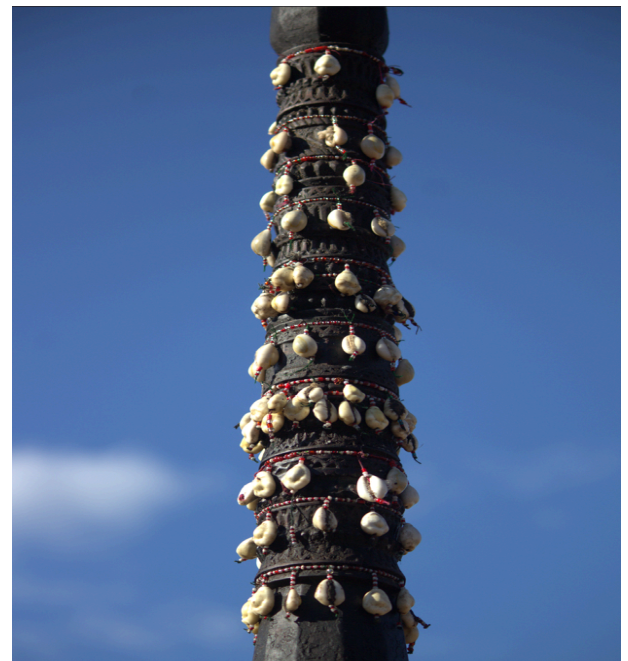
The Karbi community primarily resides in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, with their main concentration in the submontane region of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts. Situated in central Assam, Karbi Anglong is the largest district of the state in terms of area, covering around 10,434 sq km. It lies between 25°33'N to 26°35'N latitude and 92°10'E to 93°50'E longitude. The region is hilly and undulating, with elevations ranging

from 150 to 1,250 meters above sea level. The area is part of the Shillong Plateau, a geological formation characterized by rugged hills and plateaus. The Karbi region shares boundaries with several districts: North: Nagaon and Golaghat districts, South: Dima Hasao district, East: Nagaland state, West: Meghalaya state. Its location places it at the confluence of diverse cultures and ecosystems. The region is rich in biodiversity and includes parts of the Kaziranga National Park (UNESCO World Heritage Site) and Nambor Wildlife Sanctuary. (Government of Assam, Karbi Anglong District, 2024). According to 1991 Census, the population of Karbi Anglong District is 6,63,000 and is dominated by Karbi Tribe. Besides Karbis, Lalungs (Tiwas), Dimasa Kacharis, Rengma Nagas, Kuki, Garos, Khasis and Shyams occupy various pockets of the district and maintain their own ethnic identity. (ibid)

Chomangkan

Chomangkan is a complex ritualistic festival involving the worship of the ancestors and dead kin members performed by the Karbi. It is an elaborate post or secondary cremation ceremony performed in an indeterminate period in the form of a communal celebration that reflects the Karbi philosophy of life, death, afterlife and rebirth. The underlying philosophy is such that it integrates the human life to everything around and beyond it. The use of tangible and intangible materials which is reflected through songs and symbols is displayed very artistically through various carvings on bamboo and wooden structures such as *Jambili Athon* and through usage of oral songs. These songs turn individual grief into a shared, cathartic community experiences among the participants of *Chomangkan*. There are three types of *Chomangkan* the grandest among them is *Harne Chomangkan* (for people with higher income), *Langtuk Chomangkan* (for people with middle income), *Kanplapla Chomangkan* (for people with less income, requiring fewer resources).

Intricate Aesthetics of Chomangkan



Picture credit: Dilip Kathar

Jambili Athon

The *Jambili Athon* is deeply rooted in the everyday life of the Karbi people, drawing inspiration from the natural environment, daily activities, and objects of practical and cultural significance. The intricate carvings of elements such as the bottle gourd (*bong*), wooden mortar (*long-aling*), pot (*tibuk*), banana heart (*langdung*), and bracelets (*roi*) symbolize the intimate Karbi connection to their surroundings and their reliance on these objects in their daily lives. The adornments, including beads and the use of *chuselok* seeds (*Abrus precatorius*) for bird eyes (Teron 2008), further demonstrate their deep appreciation of natural beauty and their ability to integrate it into art. The creation of the *Jambili Athon* is a profound form of artistic expression, evident in its intricate designs, which are also reflected in weaving patterns, textiles, baskets, and sculptures like the *Jambili Athon* itself. The *Jambili Athon* also symbolises the tree of life since according to Karbi origin mythology, the *Bengwoi* tree, used to carve the *Jambili Athon*, grew from the spot where the placenta of a baby boy named Rang Teron was buried. While the sacred narrative uses the term *teri* (navel string or umbilical cord), in practice, the placenta—referred to as *oso-ahem* ("infant's house")—is buried. This ritual connection between the placenta and the *Jambili Athon* accentuates the sacred and symbolic origins of the tree (Teron, Nothengpi, 2022).

The Effigies



The effigies of ancestors and dead kin members are made from paddy straw. The effigy is created according to the numbers of the dead kin members and ancestors. Although the effigies are handmade in heaps sometimes it does not have any meaning until the cowries which symbolises the bones and the (*Karjong*) soul of the ancestors and members are inserted in the heart of the effigy. The effigy is then dressed and treated as a living or reanimated entity. They are introduced to the world through songs of the *charhepi*. She sings of the lives of the ancestors and deceased kin, recounting their experiences in the land of the living and the circumstances of their deaths. The song does not end with death but continues beyond the realm of the living, narrating the journey until the departed reach the land of the dead and the village of the ancestors. The effigy is dressed according to the biological gender of the deceased. The distinction between male and female effigies is carefully crafted, with their genitals skilfully made from straw to resemble male and female anatomy. The female effigy

is adorned in traditional Karbi attire, while the male effigy is similarly dressed in corresponding traditional garments.



In the picture, the effigy now considered as having a metaphysical body, soul and participating in the festival.

Miring`rang

Miring`rang* is crafted using three specific colours of thread—red, black, and white—woven in an alternating pattern. These threads are wrapped around the *miring`rang, with one colour, either red, black, or white, placed in the middle, each serving a distinct purpose. The *miring`rang* is kept in the area of the *Chomangkan* house where the kin members and ancestors reside. Additionally, it is placed at the ‘gate’ in front of the miniature houses constructed for the ritual, which serve as temporary residences for the *karjong* (soul) which represents the liminality of life between this and the other world.





The *Mek`ang*, a *miring`rang* with a red centre, the *Mek`ik*, with a black centre, and the *Mek`lok*, with a white centre, are symbolic structures crafted for each deceased individual. These structures represent the gateway between life and death—a liminal doorway connecting the world of the living to that of the dead. This gateway is also known as *Hem Anghap*, meaning the house doorway or entrance.

As part of the ritual, the ‘*Pang pen Chotai Anghap*’ (lit. back and front door) is constructed, incorporating *pang*, (back door) where a *Miring`rang* with a black centre placed in the middle and *chotai*, (front door) a *Miring`rang* with a white centre is placed.

The *Miring`rang*, a traditional object, holds a central role in this ceremony. It is held by a woman, or occasionally two women, who move it slowly from side to side in a rhythmic motion while singing the *Jili Alun*. The *Jili Alun* is an erotic song that explores themes of sexual intimacy, physical desire, and sensual gratification between men and women. This performance symbolizes the cyclical nature of existence—encompassing birth, life, and death—while emphasizing the interconnectedness of all these stages.

Kasole Alangpong

The *Kasole Alangpong*, a bamboo water bearer, is crafted for the deceased to use in the ancestral village known as *Chom Arong*. Historically, it served as a water carrier and storage vessel, but today it is made exclusively for the *Chomangkan* ritual as a symbolic representation of the traditional bamboo storage vessels, accompanying the departed kin and ancestors. The carved lines on the *Kasole Alangpong* not only enhance its aesthetic appeal but also distinguish it from the bamboo water carriers once used by the living.

The *Kasole Alangpong* is then taken to *Rongkangsam*, meaning "quiet/serene village," refers to the *thiri* (cremation ground) where the ritual takes place. From there the journey of the dead kin members and the ancestors takes place which is vividly depicted in the *Charhepi*'s songs. During cremation, if the *Kasole* is thrown into the fire, it must completely disappear; failure to do so is considered inauspicious.



In the picture, the *Kasuley Alangpong* and plates of banana leaves with food offerings.

Bongkrok (bottle gourd)



The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria* Standl) holds significant importance in Karbi rituals and culture, serving as a symbol of respect and reverence. Regarded as sacred, its seeds are believed to be a gift from Songsar Richo (Teron, 2008). The bottle gourd is traditionally used to store *hor-kangthir*, which is then offered to designated elders, including ancestors, deities, and, on occasion, spirits. During the *Chomangkan* ritual, smaller bottle gourds are carried by the nieces of the kin members. These gourds, referred to as *Pharlo Abong* (lit. Soul bottle), are believed to house the sacred soul and can only be carried by the maternal uncle's daughter. They are brought along with *sobai* (cowries), which symbolize the bones of

ancestors and kin members. The bottle gourd, in essence, is used to carry the sacred soul to the house of the Chomangkan.

Drums and Drum Beats



Drummers, led by the *Duhuidi* (master of drums), gather from various villages or territories to participate in the *Chomangkan* ritual. These drummers are responsible for playing specific drumbeats as required during different rituals or stages of the ceremony. Among the Karbi, it is believed that the drumbeats serve as a medium to notify ancestors and deceased kin about the unfolding events. The drumbeats are also a way of honouring the ancestors, celebrating their arrival, and encouraging their journey to the afterlife, even within the ancestral village. The *Cheng* (drum) and *Chengso* (ching instrument) serve as a guide for the ancestors throughout the ritual.



In the picture, A *Chengso* is played by a woman to accompany the drumbeats. The Karbi woman is adorned with a silver bangle known as *Roi*, which is named differently based on the patterns engraved on it. In this picture, the bangle is called *Roi Pengkhera*.

The Youth Chiefs: The Klengsarpo and Klengdun



In the picture, the *Klengsarpo* (Youth Chief, Klemja Ronghang) is standing on the left, while the *Klengdun* (Assistant Youth Chief, Zasera Ronghang) is on the right. Location: Loringtheipi, East Karbi Anglong.

The *Klengsarpo* (youth leader) and the *Klengdun* (assistant youth leader) hold significant roles in traditional Karbi villages, overseeing the welfare of the youth. Every territory or villages has a *klengsarpo* and *Klengdun*. The *Klengsarpo* serves as the chief youth leader, while the *Klengdun* assists in managing responsibilities. During festivals such as the *Chomangkan*, they lead the youth and guide their participation. They perform dances for both the living and the dead to witness and participate in. The dances vary according to the stages of the ritual, with the *Klengsarpo* and *Klengdun* playing a vital role in every part of the ceremony.

The Charhepi and Learning Traditional Knowledge

The *Charhepi* is a senior woman who prepares offerings, leads rituals, and sings laments. Her songs narrate the journey and guides the Karbis in the land of the living and the land of the dead, expressing sorrow, grief, contentment, and joy—emotions shared by both the living and the departed. The *Charhepi's* song serves as a liminal bridge, crossing the boundaries between the living and the non-living. This gathering of *Charhepi* is attended by women who are either training to become a *Charhepi* or seeking to gain traditional knowledge. These gatherings are the only occasions where the songs of *Kacharhe* which is considered as sacred are sung, making them the sole opportunity for these songs to be taught and learned.



In the picture, a *Charhepi* singing the sacred songs of *Chomangkan*.

Sobai (cowries)



In the *Chomangkan* ritual, cowries symbolize the bones of the deceased. These cowries are initially buried in the ground during the ceremony and later retrieved by the ritual specialist, known as the *Kurusar*, who places them in a *piba* (a woven cloth carrier traditionally used for carrying babies). The cowries, symbolizing the bones, are then carried to the residence of the *Chomangkan* venue, where additional rituals are performed.



The *Kurusar* carefully places the *sobai* (cowries) in the *piba* after retrieving them from the ground, synchronizing the movement of his hands with the rhythmic beat of the drums played by the *Duhuidi*, almost placing them three times and finally placing it, in harmony with the drumbeats.



In the picture, a woman assists the elderly lady in carrying the *aru* (the *sobai*, now called *aru*, meaning bones after the ritual). The ritual song of the *Charhepi*, the *Kurusar*'s divination, and the drumbeats of the *Duhuidi* all occur simultaneously, metaphysically transforming the *sobai* into *aru*. It is also referred to a *ser aru*, which lit. translates to 'golden bones.'

The Nimso Kerung

The *Nimso Kerung* is a traditional dance of the Karbi community with profound cultural significance, symbolizing the transition from youth to adulthood. Serving as a rite of passage, it marks a key milestone in a young individual's life as they embrace maturity and take on new responsibilities within the community. The dance is characterized by rhythmic movements performed to the beats of traditional drums. During the performance, boys and girls from different clans (those eligible for marriage) are paired together, adding to its cultural and social importance.



The *NimsoKerung* dance is performed continuously over three days and nights, starting with the *Kanso* (small dance) and progressing to the *Kanpi* (big dance).



Bamboo Design and its Usage During Chomangkan

Bamboo is widely used among the Karbi. The region is abundant in bamboo species, which are used for a wide range of purposes, both in daily life and in rituals. Bamboo is utilized for constructing houses, creating tools, and crafting everyday items like baskets, mats, and containers. It also serves as a primary material in many traditional Karbi rituals.



During the *Chomangkan* ritual, various offerings of fowls and livestock are made. The *Sirve*, on the left, is used to distribute the ceremonial pork meat, which is placed in bamboo specially designed for this purpose.

Micham

Micham below is woven before the *Chomangkan* to store meat for the festival.



In the picture above are the *Tak-Pangko* and *Tak-Pangkup*, which are used to distinguish between different territories or territorial divisions, such as *Chinthong Aso* and *Amri Aso*.



The above picture, the miniature bamboo craft are to be sent away with the ancestors, these miniature containers are called *ingti ahop* (close translation salt container) and *sangpher ahop* (flat rice container).



In the above picture, agricultural things woven to be sent with the ancestors and dead kin members. Since, the Karbi forefather rely on agriculture, hence bamboo basket, small grub hoe, chicken carrier, knife, bamboo mat are made days before the festival.

Me-an-kipt (Feeding the Fire)



Picture credit: Girbani Deka

The ending of the Chomangkan is followed by *me-an-kipt* where the host bid their ancestors and kin members goodbye and the effigies are brought along with all the various items that were prepared for farming, clothes and daily things of necessity that would facilitate their lives in the village of the ancestors is cremated. According to Dr. Dharamsing Teron, in his words "if we die our bodies are food for the Fire" (*me-an*) while our *Karjong* travel to the land of our forefather.

The Ronghang Family (Host of the *Langtuk Harne Chomangkan*) partaking in the festival in traditional attire.



The Ronghang Family Members: From left to right – Mr. Sepenga Rengma, Mrs. Meena Ronghangpi, Mr. Dhaniram Ronghang & Mrs. Mejipi Beypi, Dr. Sarthe Ronghang & Mrs. Sika Beypi, Mr. Darsing Ronghang & Mrs. Sabina Teronpi, Mr. Mojasing Ronghang & Mrs. Kasang Rongpharpi, Mrs. Kasang Terangpi, Mrs. Elish Timungpi (Host of the *Langtuk Harne Chomangkan*) Udharjan, Loringthepi, East Karbi Anglong, 2024

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