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Research Article

THE OFFERING OF NEW RICE TO GOD: THE BELIEF AND PRACTICES AMONG THE KARBIS OF ASSAM (INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

Most of the people practice the art of offering to God to be blessed. The art of offering varies from culture to culture. Karbis represents one of the well-known tribes of Assam state in India and they are mostly agriculturists and slash and burn is still the main mode of agriculture, among those living in the hills. They believe in animistic form of religion in which rituals and ancestor worship form an integral part and make their offering through performing rituals and sacrificing the animals. The Karbis have the custom to offer newly produced rice crop to the deity and the Ancestor Spirit before consuming them and they believe it as a taboo to consume the crops before the offering is done. The present papers envisages on how the newly produced rice is being offered and how it is associated with the belief of the Karbis

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INTRODUCTION

Rice is the staple food of nearly 3 billion people comprising nearly half of the world's population. The domestication of rice was the most important aspect of the agricultural revolution of 12,000 years ago, since this grain has fed more people over a longer period than any other single crop. It is believed that the earliest domestication of rice occurred in the foothills of the Himalayas in Assam in India, and then spread to the Indian subcontinent, and on to sheltered basins of northern Thailand, the upland valleys of Myanmar. The art of growing rice then was passed on to Southeast Asia, China and Japan.

In many cultures of the Asian countries rice is considered a gift of the gods, it is even today treated with reverence and its cultivation is tied to elaborate ritual. It is the most favourite and essential food representing all security and therefore, all abundance and wealth. In India, ritual offerings are presented to goddess Laxmi, the goddess of rice before planting, throughout the growing season, and again at harvest time.

In southeast Asia, rice is seen as the basis of almost all the cultures and civilizations ever created. It is also said to be responsible for the high populations of this region for if it wasn't for rice that had replaced the millets and other staple food crops that preceded it, far fewer people could have been supported by agriculture (Piper 1993:1). The truth remains that

the bulk of the cultures of Southeast Asia constitutes agriculturalists with rice as the main crop, with a few exceptions of course, in more industry-oriented nations for example. Two main elements can be derived: firstly, since rice has been the major crop cultivated in Southeast Asia for perhaps more than 7,000 years, surely cultures and civilization are interwoven with each other. Secondly, rice is such an adaptive crop that it is not impossible to successfully grow it in different environments where crops could not have been grown successfully- from swampy valleys and deltas to hot, dry land above the floods and even in the mountain forests (Piper 1993:1).

In every human society worship is performed with traditional rituals for well-being. Many tribal communities preserve this tradition through folklore and worship their deities' right from the occasion of birth to mourning death and they perform specific worship with offerings. Tribal folklore is rich in magico-religious beliefs and taboos and preserves certain plant species which they regard sacred for social, cultural and religious purposes.

Northeast India is the home of diverse mosaic of ethnic groups having distinctive social, cultural and economic identity, more akin to people of South Asia than main land India.

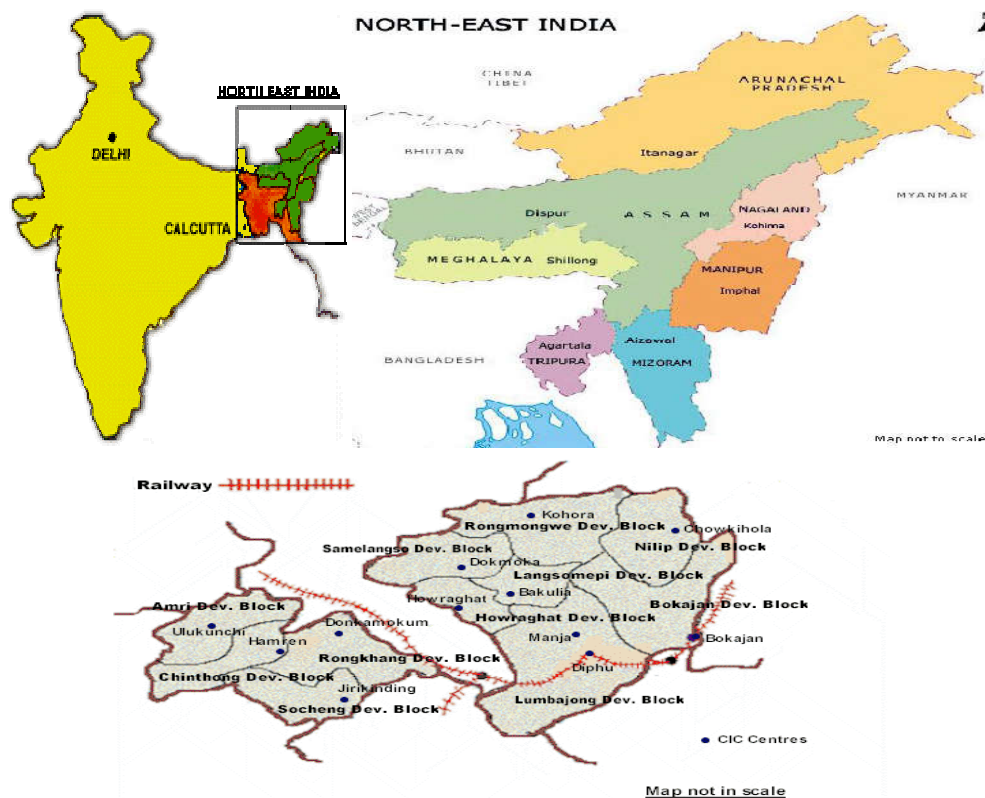
Northeast India comprises of eight states viz., Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura and is the home of more than 200 tribes.

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Because of its rich cultures, traditional technologies and enduring social institutions the northeast India had been a study ground for the colonial scholar-administrators, who documented and recorded each aspect of their culture.

According to 2011 census the district has a total population of 965,280 of which male and female population were 493,482 and 471,798 respectively



Map showing the Lumbajong block in Karbi Anglong district of Assam in northeast India

The Karbis are one of the major tribal groups of Assam, India. Ethnically the Karbis belong to Mongoloid group and speak the languages of Tibeto-Burman group. The term “Karbi” is derived from the word “*Thekar Kibi*” meaning offering of household deities before eating or drinking either in private or in social occasion. The Karbis have five clans called “*nok-hum*”. These are Ejang (Enghi), Tunjang (Timung), Kronjang (Teron), Lijang (Engti) and Hangjang (Terang). These clans are completely exogamous and marriage between a boy and a girl belonging to the same clan can never take place since the children of the same clan are considered as brother and sister.

The Karbis believe in the existence of souls and spirits. They are the Ancestors worshipper. They perform different rituals at different occasions. Most of the Karbis are cultivators. There are different rituals for the whole cultivation calendar right from the preparation or selection of site for the jhum field till the end of harvesting.

The present study was done on the Karbis of living in three villages of Lumbajong block of Karbi Anglong, Assam (India). The villages are: 1) Kakoti Ronghang, 2) Borsing Timng and 3) Ram Teron Village. The people of the villages were mostly Jhum cultivators and some of them cultivate wet land paddy cultivation. Karbi Anglong District is situated in the central part of Assam in India situated between 25° 33' N to 26°35' N Latitude and 92°10' to 93°50' E Longitude with a total geographical area of 10,434 sq. kms.

Objectives

The objectives of the present papers are:

- 1) To identify how the ritual of offering of new rice to god ‘*Sang Kimi Arnarn Kipi*’.
- 2) To study how the ritual it is associated with the belief of the Karbis.

The present data for the study were collected from three villages viz., i) Kakoti Ronghang, ii) Borsing Timung and iii) Ram Teron in Lumbajong Block of Karbi Anglong district in Assam, India. In-depth interview were taken from the religious specialists and persons having knowledge about the rituals. A total of 28 respondents were covered from the selected villages in the present study. It primarily focuses on to know how and why the ritual of offering of new rice to god ‘*Sang kimi arnam kipi*’ was done. Besides, participant observation was done during the time of ritual performance to be familiar with the way the ritual is performed.

DISCUSSION

Sang Kimi Arnarn Kipi (Sang=rice, kimi=new, Arnarn=god, kipi=give) is the ritual offering God the new rice cultivated in the year. It is celebrated every year after the people had cultivated in the field and the harvesting is on progress or after harvesting, before people start consuming the new rice cultivated in the year. If the paddy cultivation is done in the jhum field then this ritual is performed in the months of August

or September or if the offering is made after the harvesting of paddy in the wetland then it is done in the months of November or December. People do not consume the rice or other cultivated crops and vegetables before offering to god. The offering of other crops grown in the field can be offered along with the rice or it can be also offered separately. In the morning when all the preparation for the rituals is done the head male member of the family would go to the place where the ritual of offering new rice is to perform taking all the necessary materials along with him. He will be accompanied by some of the family members and villagers. Usually the ritual is performed by the head male member of the family. If he is performing for the ritual for the first time then he would be guided by the priest. The place for offering new rice to the deity is permanently made at the forest nearby home or nearby the jhum field. In the place alters for the deities were made. The deities *Tiki Anglong* and *Dorbar Anglong* were offered betel nuts and betel leaf with rice beer along with the newly cultivated rice.

Here the betel leaf offered is the wild one known as 'Ai'. The offering is made with the narration of enchanting hymn. The result of the offering made to the deities was examined by narrating of the verse and throwing the two betel leaves together on the alter. If the betel leaves falls upside down that is opposite to one another then it indicates the presence of the deity and as accepting the offering made to him. When the ritual in the forest was done then they bring back some rice and rice beer to home. And in the alter of the household god which is kept in the house, rice and rice beer was offered. Rice beer was kept in the middle and little amount of rice was kept nine time separately one by one surrounding the bottle gourd containing the rice beer. In the house the rice and the rice beer was kept for the night which no one is supposed to touch it.

On the next day the result was again examined whether god have accepted the offered rice or not. On the next day the result would be examined by viewing at the position of the rice that was kept in the last day.



Photo 1 Preparing materials for the rituals.



Photo 2 Arranging wild betel leaf for the ritual



Photo 3 Offering rice, rice beer, maize, betel leaf



Photo 4 Alter of the deity after the ritual



Photo 5 Offering rice, rice beer and maize



Photo 6 Alter of the household god to the household god.

If the rice remains as it was then it takes as god has accepted the offering and when the position of the rice changed or the offered rice seems to be touched by someone or human hair was found in that then it was believed that there was some problems and believed that the household god is not pleased with the offering.

CONCLUSION

Among the Karbis rituals and ancestor worship form an integral part of their religious life and make their offering through performing rituals and sacrificing the animals. They have the custom to offer newly produced rice crop to the deity and the Ancestor Spirit before consuming them. The Karbis do not consume new crops before the offering is done to the deity and believe it as a taboo if the new crop is consume before the offering is done. The Karbis have a deep faith in their religion and they believed that each region and each thing have its spirits or gods. The Karbis believe in appeasing the deities in order to maintain a good relationship with them. Among the Karbis there are numbers of rituals associated with the cultivation. Among them one of the significant rituals related to harvesting of rice crop is 'Sang Kimi Arnam Kipi' and the ritual is done to appease the deities showing once gratitude towards the almighty in order to gain their blessings and to have good cultivations in future. The ritual is still in practice by the Karbis especially living in the hills of Assam.

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