

An Appraisal to the Marriage System of the Karbis of Assam

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ABSTRACT Marriage is an indispensable crisis right in all societies of the world. It is understood that the marriage has been the backbone of the human civilization right from ancient period to the contemporary society. Marriage is one of the oldest socially recognized institution, and essential for the satisfaction of sexual urges and procreation of siblings. There is no definition which adequately covers all types of human marriage. Biologically, the institution of marriage arises from the facts of human procreation and the rearing of children, and also from the lengthy period of dependence of the children on their parents and the need for prolonged parental care and training. It is the combination of mating with parenthood which basically constitutes human marriage. A type popular in a society may be treated as incest in another society. Innumerable culture traits are indispensably found adhered to the marriage system. The Karbis of Assam also have a conspicuous system of marriage. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the marriage system of the Karbis of Assam.

INTRODUCTION

‘If kinship is the basis of social organization in all societies, the marriage is the basis of kinship. marriage and the family are found in some form everywhere in the world. Marriage functions to control sexual activity within the society, following the rules by which the group is organized’ (Whiteford and Friedl 1992: 256). Mutual attraction between male and female due to some biological and psychological reasons exists since male-female come in to the contact with each other. Sexual intercourse between male and female is necessary for physical satisfaction and for the birth of the progeny. ‘Socially, however there are added to the sexual and parental ideas of marriage other elements; marriage is given the hallmark of social approval; it becomes a legal contact; it defines the relationship between husband and wife and parents and children; it has to be concluded in a public and solemn manner, sometimes receiving, as a sacrament, the blessing of religion, and as a rite, the good auspicious of magic’ (Hewitt 1969: 113).

According to Harris and Johnson (2000: 133) ‘The concept of “marriage” is the basic part of the definition of nuclear, polygamous, and extended families and other forms of domestic organization. Although anthropologists are convinced that marriage occurs in every culture, we encounter great difficulty in coming up with a definition that can be applied universally. A famous definition proposed by Kathleen Gough (1968) can serve as a starting point for our discussion. It makes the following points:

- Marriage is a relationship established between a woman and one more person.
- This relationship assures that a child born to the woman is accorded full birth rights common to normal members of his or her society, provided that
- The child is conceived, and born under certain approved circumstances’.

It has been already stated that marriage is an institution of society, which can have very different implications in different contexts. Therefore, it is not an easy task to give a definition to cover all type of marriage found in different societies.

Sarana (1969: 159-167) in his paper entitled *Some Observation on the Definition of Marriage*, has discussed about the limitations of definition of marriage given by different scholars. In the Karbi society also, a traditional set of rules integral to marriage along with some impinging factors can be traced. The primary concern of this paper is to provide an overall idea about the marriage system of the Karbis of Assam.

Data has been collected in irregular intervals in three medium sized homogenous Karbi villages, viz., Deithor, Rongchali, and Tara-dong in the foothills of Karbi Anglong district near Numaligarh town of Assam during the year 2005.

‘The Karbis, popularly known as Mikirs, constitute one of the important tribes of Assam. The origin and exact route of their migration to the present habitat is quite obscure. They are scattered over the district of Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivasagar, and Karbi Anglong of Assam

and Khasi hills of Meghalaya. Notwithstanding they are mostly concentrated in the newly formed district, Karbi Anglong, of Assam. They called themselves 'arleng', the meaning of which is 'slanting place near a hill', and thus denotes the people living in the slopes of the hills. Though many scholars use the term 'arleng' as equivalent to the word 'man', actually the *manit* or *munit* is the proper term used by the Karbis to denote a person. Infact, the word 'arleng' is confined to the man of Karbi tribe only. Nowadays they identify themselves as 'Karbi', though the origin of the term is uncertain. Racially, they belong to the Mongoloid group, while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group.

Traditionally the Karbi is a hill-tribe, but for different reasons they scattered over plain areas also. The Karbi culture has been imbibed with many elements of the cultures of the Assamese Hindus and the Khasis. The cultures of the Karbis is prominent for traits like depending on jhuming, central place of bamboo in material culture, indispensable role of rice beer in socio-economic and religious life, and for their rich folklores including a local version of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* known as *Chabin Alun* among them' (Medhi 1988: 8-13).

Jhum is their mainstay, though some of them have taken to permanent cultivation. In the Karbi society, there are five clans (*kurs*)—Inghi, Ingti, Terang, Teron, and Tumung. Each clan is divided into a number of sub-clans. One of the important institutions of the Karbis is *Jirkedam* (bachelors' dormitory) which is associated with agriculture, social and almost all other activities of the society. Most of their community rituals are related to their mainstay, i.e., agriculture. The most elaborate socio-religious ceremony of the Karbis is the death ceremony called *Chomangkan*, 'which is believed to be diffused from the culture of the neighbouring Khasi tribe. They believe that unless the spirits of the dead are sanctified with the elaborate ritual of *Chomangkan*, they do not get admittance into the *Chomarong*, the world of the dead, which is only temporary resting place until they are reborn in the same family or in the same clan' (Medhi 1988:12).

'In sum, marriage is everywhere a set of cultural pattern to sanction parenthood and to provide a suitable background for the care and rearing of children. It is, in effect, the major cultural

mechanism to ensure the continuation of the family and other groupings based on kinship' (Beals and Hoijer, 1961: 414- 415). Different social scientists like Beals (1953), Piddington (1961), Murdock (1967), Barkataki (1967), Majumdar (1980), Cantlie (1984), Srinivas (1991), Lyall and Stack (1997), Lucy Mair (1998) et al. have studied marriage theoretically and also as the integral part of the social matrix in different societies. The Karbis have a pristine set of rules integral to marriage (*kepanagri*). The Karbi is a patrilineal tribe and descent, inheritance, succession, authority, and residence after marriage are traced through male line among them. After marriage, a girl has to leave her family of orientation and has to live with her husband in the husband's family of orientation or in a neolocal residence. The Karbi female use *pi* after their surname. For instance, if a girl's father's surname is Teron, she has to write her surname as Terongpi. A girl does not change her surname after marriage, but her children have to use her husband's surname.

The Karbis practise tribal endogamy and clan exogamy. The tribal endogamy is highly favoured and esteemed, though in recent times marriage with the members of other communities is observed. Marriage between a boy and a girl of the same clan is strictly prohibited. Since the violation if this rule leads to ex-communication, this incest taboo is rarely disobeyed. The Karbis are described as a monogamous tribe. However, the occurrence of polygamous type of marriage is not altogether uncommon among them. Traditionally the practice of polygyny is not favoured. Only among the richer section of the Karbis polygyny is noted. Generally a polygynous marriage is made to overcome the barrenness of the first wife. Child marriage is an unknown system among the Karbis. Junior levirate (*kepatang*) is practiced by them and following that customary law a man has to marry his deceased elder brother's wife. However, under no circumstances, the elder brother is allowed to marry the widow of his younger brother. Widow marriage is also practiced by the Karbis.

Asymmetrical cross-cousin marriage (*orgasopi-pesokapangri*) is the preferential type of marriage among the Karbis by which a man has to marry his mother's brother's daughter. Nowadays, the younger generation prefers to choose their own mates beyond the periphery of the pristine norms. Marriage by negotiation (*adam achar*) is the common practice of the Karbis;

however, marriage by mutual consent and elopement (*kanghupan*), and marriage by capture (*kachonghupan*), are also not rare. Traditionally a girl is married soon after her puberty and the groom is generally older than the bride. Age of marriage among the boys is 18 to 20 years and the girls is 15 to 16 years. However, a boy marries from the age of 16 and a girl from the age of 14 in the traditional Karbi society. In case of marriage by negotiation, the father of the groom initiates the process and performs the lead. In most of the cases, the boy and girl are consulted before making the proposal final. A Karbi girl cannot be forcibly married against her will.

In the study villages 52 per cent of the marriages are performed by elopement and 48 per cent are performed by negotiation. It is due to the fact that marriage by negotiation incurred huge expenditure; to meet such a big expenditure it is not possible for a hand to mouth family. Therefore, the parents of a poor family allow their sons and daughter to establish families through elopement. Such a couple resides somewhere for a couple of month and then comes to the husband's family of orientation on in a neolocal residence. To lead a normal life like the co-villagers, the couple has to offer a feast to entertain the co-villagers. In the study village 53 per cent of the males married their cross cousins and 22 per cent of the females received their mates through junior levirate system. The junior levirate type of marriage is practised by them to secure the widow's future in the deceased husband's family. Traditionally they practised widow marriage; however, now a days they try to avoid this type of marriage except the compulsory marriage of the widow with her deceased husband's brother.

'If a young boy likes a girl, he sends his father, or both the parents, to the girl's father and leaves a betrothal ring or bracelet with the girl. Sometimes a gourd of rice beer is taken and accepted. If after the acceptance the girl is married to another boy, the village council fines the girl's family. The length of engagement is not uniform. If the girl and the boy have come of age, it does not last long' (Barkataki 1967: 51). Marriage takes place at the bride's house. In cases of marriage by mutual consent and elopement and marriage by capture, the marriage ceremony has to be performed after the birth of the first sibling at a convenient time. Unlike most of the tribal communities of North-East India, Karbi marriage system is devoid of bride-price. Divorce (*kasakok*) is

very rare, but permissible through the village council only when the separation of the spouse is inevitable. If the wife is barren or if she goes to her parent's home and refuses to return to her husband's home in such cases only, divorce is granted by the village council. A husband, whose wife refuses to return to his house from her parent's house, offers a gourd full of rice beer to his wife's parents and by this custom, both the husband and wife become free from the marriage bond. After divorce, husband and wife are free to marry again.

Nuptial songs are integral part of the Karbi marriage. Innumerable marriage songs provide a mentionable dimension to the Karbi folk-lore. Not only the marriage songs, the conversations of the bride's and groom's parties on the marriage day also focuses the frolic loving tendency and art of expression of the feelings of the Karbis. Barkataki, (1967:51) describes well about such conversation: 'The bride's father asks the bride groom's party why they have come and why presents have been offered. The bride groom's father replies: Your sister (bridegroom's mother) has become old and can not work, so we have brought our son to marry your daughter. The reply from the bride's father is as follows: My daughter is unworthy and she does not know weaving or any other household work. The bridegroom's father then replies: never mind, we will teach her those things ourselves'. Such situations are properly depicted in the marriage songs of the Karbis. The author can't refrain from quoting the meaning of a marriage song in this context:

'O my dear belle, men from your father-in-law's house have come to take you, your father-in-law and mother-in-law become old. Their teeth had fall, their hair become gray and strength minimized, their eye-sight become foggy. Who will love and look after them? To love and look after them, you have to go to their house'.

In different marriage songs of the Karbis, description of the mundane duties, life of women, love, sorrow, kinship ties, duties and obligations, customary laws, views towards the life, etc. are depicted by the unknown poet in a convincing and sensitive way. It is pertinent to note here that marriage songs are sung only by the female folk and participation of male folk in it is tabooed.

A marriage does not bind only two persons but also binds two households and two groups

of people with duties and expectations. 'Sex and reproduction are cultural as well as biological phenomena. In all societies, there are customs governing how and under what circumstances they should occur. Marriage plays a central role in these customs. Typically people marry to legitimize sexual union and to facilitate childrearing. Nevertheless, the reasons for marrying are diverse, and the families created by marriage differ in many ways from society to society. Ethnographers have reported marriages that are contracted by parents before the birth of a child, marriages that have no public ceremony, marriages that established no common residence, and marriages between more than two persons, to name but four examples. What then are the minimum defining characteristics of marriage? While the rituals and customs surrounding marriage may differ around the world, the concept of marriage may be universally defined as a socially accepted sexual and economic union involving a lasting commitment between two or more people who have parental rights and obligations to any children of the union' (Crapo 1993: 174). The Karbi society has strict rules regarding marriage obligations. In every step of a Karbi marriage, such rules can be easily observed. If the bridegroom's party on the way to the bride's house have to go through different Karbi villages, it has to offer a gourd full of rice beer to the members of each village. This custom naturally develops fellow feelings among the villagers besides the people of the bride and the groom's villages. The guests are entertained with a feast and plenty of country liquor on the marriage day at the bride's house. A section of the Karbi tribe has abandoned the pristine religion and has embraced Christianity. These Karbis performed their marriage according to the rule of Christianity. The educated section of Karbis who does not follow the tribal endogamy sometimes performs marriages according to the norms of their bride's community or even prefers a court marriage.

The Karbis are overwhelmingly rural and, therefore, they generally arrange marriages when they get rest after continuous labour in the agricultural field. To a considerable extent the local and extra-local settings determine the patterns of social relations among the Karbis. The basic values of Karbis are handed over from generation to generation. But there are significant regional and syncretistic variations. Many traits

of the Assamese Hindu culture have been percolated to the Karbi culture and become integral to it. Inter-marriage with other communities, especially with the Assamese Hindus, widened the affinal kin horizon of them. The Karbis of a particular village have affinal ties with a number of Karbi and non-Karbi settlements of Assam and Meghalaya. The presence of affines in the nearby villages facilitates contact and communication with them. In different rituals and ceremonies held in a household, affinal kin from different villages also meet one another. In such occasions, affinal kin from neighbouring villages are always invited.

Kusum in her book *Harassed Husbands* (2003) has provided many cases of the cruelty of woman towards husbands and the members of the husbands' family. Such situation has not been observed among the Karbis of the study area. Till to the recent past the Karbis was a peace loving tribe. They obey the age old customary laws, particularly for the fear of excommunication. Generally a man seeks divorce due to the wife's barrenness and laziness. Sometimes a wife also divorced her imbecile, physically handicapped or irresponsible husband.

An already existing affinal kin in other village is usually used in exploring possibilities for finding out a match for a boy or a girl of the village. The strength of ties maintained with the extra-local kin varies according to the nature of situation and from person to person. The geographical distance between localities also determines the strength of ties maintained with the extra-local kin. There is a fair amount of choice with regard to interactions with extra-local kin excepting from 'priority kin' (Piddington 1961: 15), such as wife's parents, wife's brothers and mother's brothers.

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