

**Somenath Bhattacharjee**

## **SACRED GROVES IN KARBI ANGLONG: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL OBSERVATION**

### **Introduction**

In this context of Indian civilization, the tribal culture has its own importance. The daily lives of the tribal people are closely related with their surrounding environment. The tribal culture has its own heritage and it is nourished in the lap of nature. Being closely related with nature and environment their cultural practices reflect devotion and obedience to nature. All societies possess beliefs that can be grouped under the term religion. These beliefs vary from culture to culture and from time to time. Yet despite their variety, religion can be defined as any set of attitudes, beliefs and practices pertaining to supernatural power, whether that power be forces, goals, spirits, ghosts or demons. Religion is a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in people and nature (Haviland, 1970: 363). Malinowski viewed religion from the all embracing perspective of human fate and destiny. On the basis of his observation among Trobriand Islanders, he defined religion as a means to free human mind from fears and emotions. He observed religion of Trobrianders contributing functionally to human beings or society in removing tensions and emotions, protecting norms and values, assisting in maintaining moral order, inserting the sense of unity, functioning as an agency of social control, inducing the sense of security and developing virtues such as love, pity, sympathy, honesty, truth, non-violence, etc. (Upadhyay and Pandey, 2002: 211). A social function of religion is to sanction a wide range of conduct. In this context, religion plays a role in social control. Another social function of religion is its role in the maintenance of social solidarity. One other area in which religion serves a social function is education, like initiation rites; one can serve to enhance learning and so help ensure the perpetuation of a non-literate culture (Haviland, 1970: 383).

There is another way to look at religion, through science. Science has provided human culture with an excellent understanding of the natural world

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SOMENATH BHATTACHARJEE, Department of Anthropology, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam. PIN- 782460, *E-mail: bhattacharjee\_somenath@rediffmail.com*

and human behaviour. However, for the scientist, the logic of religious behaviour is not simple. The scientist must understand religion as the complex working of a human brain that is not responding directly to observable reality. Religious behaviour is actually rational in an economic sense in spite of the fact that the believers work with unobservable actors and magical processes. The rationality is economic and can be seen in the social and material rewards that flow from participation in religious groups. When there is a market place for different faiths, individuals usually choose, consciously or unconsciously, the faith that brings them the most rewards. The rationality in this case is apparent when one measures the rewards that flow from different religious activities. So, despite its apparent irrationality, religious activity can have a latent economic rationality. However, economic rationality is the surface manifestation of underlying tropic tendencies built into the mammalian brain. This is seen in the optimal foraging behaviour of most species. Thus, evolution can cause economic rationality. Religion may be regarded as a type of irrational adaptation. It is irrational in the sense that it does not move individuals to solve problems rationally. Many social scientists prefer a single encompassing definition of religion, an essential definition. Kirkpatrick (2005) saw religion as psychological attachment, a powerful emotional relationship to things. Religion is a collection of behaviour that is only unified in our Western conception of it. There is no reason to assume, and good reason not to assume, that this behaviour evolved together at the same time in response to a single shift in the environment. For example, Atran (2002) and Boyer (2001) saw religion as a great potpourri of ideas and behaviour with many independent evolutionary origins outside of religion itself. Geertz (1958:3) stated that, sacred symbols function to synthesize a person's ethos, the tone, character and quality of their life and mood and their world view. Spiro (1966:95) discussed that religion relates only to the supernatural, people view it as a set of notions, concept and ideas that serve to order their universe and define its boundaries. Thus, religion is provisionally defined as a set of behaviour. It has evolved at different times with different adaptive functions. It looks like the evolutionary science of religion will lead in different directions; however, it should eventually be able to explain how and why human beings develop and maintain panoply of complex irrational behaviours that are very influential in their lives.

The livelihood of the tribal people, particularly in the Indian context is immensely depended upon environment and natural resources. Tribal social norms, values and customs governed the use of resources and their traditional belief systems promoted the sustainable use of natural resources. It framed a cultural cognition of ethno-ecology, for the conservation and preservation of the rare and useful wild plant species by socially declaring small areas of forest (ranging from a few hectares upto a few kilometers) as being the sacred dwelling of the deities and a culturally specified zone of socio-religious practices. Such areas are protected by the indigenous communities and are

known as the Sacred Groves (SG). SGs can be classified into three broad categories namely-

1. **Traditional Sacred Groves:** It is the dwelling place of a village deity and is represented by an elementary symbol.
2. **Temple Grove:** It is created around a temple and conserved.
3. **Burial Grove:** It is created around a burial ground.

Malhotra *et al.* (2001) stated that in India the tradition of SGs is reported from most parts of the country and approximately 13,270 sacred groves have been documented so far (Table 1).

In this context, in the state of Assam, the Karbi Anglong district is predominantly inhabited by a number of tribal groups and is believed to be a thriving ground of more than 40 proliferating SGs. Among the Karbis it is known as *Than*, which is larger in area. *Ronghang Rongbong*, located in the Hamren sub-division of West Karbi Anglong is the only documented SG in Karbi Anglong, which is also recognised as the cultural capital of the concerned people. Meanwhile, it is assumed that in Hamren numerous unreported Sacred Groves are also existing without any adequate documentation. Thus the present study is an attempt to identify a few SGs and the socio-religious belief of the studied people associated with them.

### CONCEPT OF SACRED GROOVES AMONG THE KARBIS

**The present study and the methodology applied:** The Karbi Anglong District is situated in the central part of Assam. It consists mostly of undulating and hilly terrain with numerous rivers and streams and is situated between 25°33' N to 26°35' N Latitude and 92°10'E to 93°50'E Longitude. It has a total geographical area of 10,434 sq. kms and a population of around 8,13,311. The population of the district is predominantly tribal. The major tribal ethnic groups of this district Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Dimasas, Hmars, Garos, Rengma Nagas, etc. Besides, a large number of non-tribals also lived together in this hill region. The Karbis were the indigenous community of the said region. The studied people were all belonging to the Karbi tribal group which was the numerically dominant people of the district.

The present study has been done on the basis of field work in the Hamren sub division of West Karbi Anglong. The studied areas were one of the earliest settlements of the Karbi people. The study was conducted among 300 families with a total population of 1653. Among them there were 852 males and 801 females. The concerned people are animist by religious belief and practices. Being a dweller of the hilly, isolated tracts they worshipped the dense forest, big rivers, mountains, waterfalls and even sun and moon as deity (Bey, 2009: 2). In their daily livelihood nature has played a major role. On the other hand the concerned people were also aware of the fact that proper

utilization of natural resources and its worship could sustain their livelihood. So, their socio-cultural aspects are deeply co-related with nature. In this context, the concept of sacred grove and their significance is very important for their traditional cultural practices. The study was conducted during the period of January 2011 to March 2013. There were four divisions of the total field work.

**Division-1:** Foremostly, the general observation of the village was done along with the completion of Preliminary Census Schedule (PCS) to know the demographic composition of the studied people.

**Division-2:** Case studies were taken on the concerned families. They was focused on the issues of their historical background, traditional occupational pursuit, religious belief, folk cultural heritages, indigenous knowledge, concept about environment and environmental resources.

**Division-3:** Detailed open structured interviews were taken from the key informant, eldest person of the settlement, leader of the traditional political organization of the concerned society, administrative authority related with the studied settlement. It focused on the relevance of animistic religious belief and worship of scared grooves in the daily livelihood and socio-cultural practices of the concerned people.

**Division-4:** The data was collected about the significance of natural resources in their daily livelihood and the importance of sacred groves in their socio-religious aspect.

### ***Objective of the present study***

The present study is primarily focused -

1. To know about the animistic religious belief of the people.
2. To know about the importance of environment and locally available floral resources in the religious aspect of the studied people.
3. To know about the significance of sacred groves in the socio-religious aspect of the concerned people.

The major religious festivals observed by the Karbis are mentioned below-

- (1) Chojun: The spot of "Chojun" is generally selected near the house of the family which wishes to performs the puja. The deities in this festival are Barithe, Sar Arnam Arni and the Devil (Hi-i) and other smaller Gods. Hemphu is the prime deity of the Karbis. The puja is performed for the welfare of the family.
- (2) Rongker: Rongker is performed at the beginning of the year by propitiating different deities for the well being of the entire village.

The deities are worshipped by all the elderly male people of the village so that with their blessings the people of the village could be free from diseases, natural calamities so that the families could have a good harvest. The women are not allowed to enter the worship place.

- (3) Sok-keroi : Sok-keroi festival is observed when the paddy field is ripened to cut and taken to a place specially cleared in the field. Sok-keroi means the carrying of the paddy from the field.
- (4) Hacha kekan festival: Hacha kekan is associated with after harvesting rejoice. Hence it is to be assumed that the hacha kekan is secular in its activities.
- (5) Chomangkan festival: It is the death ceremony of the Karbis and is performed for the eternal place of the deceased. It is the most elaborate religious ceremony of the Karbis which gets continued for four days and four nights.
- (6) Daily Religious Performances:- According to the Karbis tradition, Songsar Richo (Deity of heaven) took the responsibility to create the animal kingdom and nature. He ordered them to construct a house beneath the tree called *Tiji* and *Timur* that is instrumental for the work of human creation. The Karbi's animistic religious belief are associated with the worship to *Barithe* which is belief to be the deity of rain, *Hemphu* is belief to be deity of the universe, *Mukrang* is belief to be protector of human beings and *Rasinja* is belief as a mother earth. In every household they were regularly worshipped (Teron, 2011: 58).

From the field study it was revealed that the SGs are immensely secrets among them and they were very skeptical about its discussion with others. However through gradual rapport establishment they became convinced that, the study was only associated with academic interest and no harm or intervention will be to the Sacred Groves and their traditional belief. On the basis of collected data it was found that there were several Sacred Groves in the said region, as described below-

1. **Ronghang Rongbong:** It was located about 16 km south of Hamren. Customary rituals were performed here for the well being of the entire community. The cultural dignitaries of the studied people were located here. The geographical area of the said territory was considered as very auspicious and any polluted or disturbing activities were strictly forbidden.
2. **Inglong Kiri:** The Inglong Kiri hill was situated in the interior of the Marat Longri wildlife sanctuary, 10 km away from the Diphu sub-division. It was worshipped in every Karbi household for the familial well being. Any sort of entrance here was strictly forbidden

and the people were seriously terrified that an intrusion into the area will bring the wrath of their traditional deity dwelling there.

3. **Ritasor:** It was situated in Baithalangso of Hamren and literally meant the hills of deity. It was regarded as the dwelling place of the deity of Jhum cultivation. The deity was worshipped annually with adequate rituals for the better production of crop.
4. **Bichikri:** It was considered as one of the most important forests among the Karbis and among the reserved SGs in the district. It was recognized as very significant, as it was intimately associated with their animistic religious belief, traditional institutions and the legend of the land. It was highly protected and the deity was annually worshipped with the community festival named as *Bichikri Rongker*. Here the *Pinpo-Habe* or the social dignitaries of traditional institutions actively participate.
5. **Arlongpuru Hamren:** This SG was located about 3-4 kms from Umcheret village in the interior of Hamren. The site was scattered with rocks and boulders and was recognized as a very sacred place for worship. The concerned priest was supposed to maintain the sanctity of the area around the place of worship. Particularly cooking or any sort of unholy and polluted activities were strictly forbidden.
6. **Mahamaya:** In the Dokmoka headquarter under Samelangso developmental block, the famous Mahamaya temple was located. The surrounding forest covered region was considered by the Karbi people as highly sacred and any sort of entry by the outsiders was strictly forbidden. They used to practice a number of rituals in the said region.
7. **Rek Anglong:** Located on the hill top, this Sacred Grove was considered as the abode of the protector of the Karbis and reckoned as '*phu*' (grandfather). The site was considered as highly sacred. The local people familiar with the Grove stated that, the deity could not tolerate any polluted activity within the demarcated sacred area. It had two places of worship for their traditional priest and near to it was another flat rock where the people could sit and offer their prayer.

It is to be mentioned here that, in the studied Sacred Groves as well as in adjacent localities a number of plants were recognized as very significant by the Karbi. They use different parts of such plants in their major religious festivals and rituals. Each of such collection had certain norms and taboo which is strictly maintained by them. Generally all such collections were conducted in day time and it was done by both the male and female. However, any pregnant woman or if a women was menstruating during the said time, then she is forbidden from such collection. Primarily all such collections were

done by the adult people and generally the children abstain from it (see Table 2).

**General observation:** In the context of livelihood of the Karbis multifarious environmental resources play a very vital role. The concerned people intimately depend upon nature for their sustenance. Thus for them, it was very much significant to worship nature and to appease the supernatural power for their social security and well being. Their worship of nature was associated with numerous folk performances. Such performances were not merely for their recreation, but denoted their devotion to supernatural power and agencies. Among the Karbis a number of religious performances and rituals can be noticed. Most of their rituals were performed at the community level in the village and all the villagers collectively participated. Their entire worship was focused and related to the issue of safety, security, protection and betterment of the entire community.

In this context the concept of Sacred Grove had a special resemblance. They culturally demarcated a particular geographical area and it was worshipped by all the community members. Thus it can be noted that through such socio-cultural sanction and socio-religious recognition, important environmental resources were significantly sustained by them. Further, it can be noticed that, most of their rituals conducted in major religious festivals required different parts of certain auspicious plants and without their presence such rituals were socially not sanctioned. It is to be mentioned here that the sacred groves of Karbi Anglong were very little known. During the study it was observed that, primarily those were dedicated to different deities and the places were demarcated for ritualistic and traditional cultural practices. The SGs and their adjacent localities were a rich zone of diversified floral and faunal resources. A number of such floral resources were an inseparable part of their animistic rituals as well as indigenous knowledge of health care practices. The Karbi people were preserving and sustaining those resources through their indigenous knowledge throughout generations. Consequently it was sustaining the traditional folk cultural practices and animistic religious belief, through its transmission by oral tradition and enculturation.

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**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Sacred Groves in India**

<i>State</i>	<i>Number of Sacred Groves</i>
Andhra Pradesh	750
Arunachal Pradesh	58
Assam	40
Chhattisgarh	600
Gujarat	29
Haryana	248
Himachal Pradesh	5000
Jharkhand	21
Karnataka	1424
Kerala	2000
Maharashtra	1600
Manipur	365
Meghalaya	79
Orissa	322
Rajasthan	9
Sikkim	56
Tamil Nadu	448
Uttaranchal	1
West Bengal	670
Total	13,720

*Source:* Malhotra *et al.* 2001:12



**Table 2**  
**Different Plants used by the Karbi People in Different Rituals**

<i>Sl.no.</i>	<i>Local name of the plant</i>	<i>Parts used</i>	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Purpose of use</i>
1.	<i>Arhe</i>	Branches	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
2.	<i>Birik</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
3.	<i>Phongrong</i>	Branches	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
4.	<i>Vomu achimi</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
5.	<i>Kaiphō</i>	Stem	<i>Chojun</i> and other ritual	Familial well being
6.	<i>Phelang</i>	Leaves	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
7.	<i>Cehe lobor</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
8.	<i>Hanthu</i>	Leaves	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
9.	<i>Nimsopechok</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
10.	<i>Loru</i>	Leaves	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
11.	<i>Ahom birik</i>	Fruits	<i>Chojun</i>	To purify the plants used for the rituals
12.	<i>Hepi</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
13.	<i>Tarsing Chingnan</i>	Stem and twigs		<i>Chojun</i> and <i>Someme</i> Post to construct platform and to cure infertility.
14.	<i>Mirtaksu</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chojun</i>	Familial well being
15.	<i>Pharkong</i>	Twigs	<i>Someme</i>	To prevent the influence of evil spirit.
16.	<i>Cho-ik</i>	Leaves	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
17.	<i>Mongjin</i>	Twigs	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
18.	<i>Pharche</i>	Twigs	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
19.	<i>Iangmi reng</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
20.	<i>Timur</i>	Leaves	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
21.	<i>Arlak</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
22.	<i>Tiji arong</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
23.	<i>Pak arong</i>	Twig	<i>Someme</i>	To cure infertility.
24.	<i>Suve</i>	Twig	<i>Kachecham</i>	To purify the soul of a person who met up with accidental death.
25.	<i>Thengmu</i>	Twig	<i>Duikhrai</i>	To nullify the influence of evil spirit in sacred groves.
26.	<i>Tamsir</i>	Twigs	<i>A jo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of enemy.
27.	<i>Kove</i>	Fruits	<i>Rong Arnam, Rit Anglong</i>	Familial well being.
28.	<i>Arpik</i>	Stem	<i>Lamke maja</i>	To protect family from the influence of enemy.
29.	<i>Samphat</i>	Stem	<i>A jo aseh</i>	To redress the effect of evil spirit on family.

*table contd.*

<i>Sl.no.</i>	<i>Local name of the plant</i>	<i>Parts used</i>	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Purpose of use</i>
30.	<i>Pre</i>	Leaves	<i>A jo Rongker</i>	To protect community from epidemic disease.
31.	<i>Hijung</i>	Resin	<i>All household rituals.</i>	Used for fragrance.
32.	<i>Ingre</i>	Entire plant	<i>Kachecham</i>	To purify the soul of a person who met up with accidental death.
33.	<i>Narlong</i>	Twig	<i>A jo Rongker</i>	To protect community from epidemic disease.
34.	<i>Tara</i>	Leaves	<i>Rong Arnam</i>	Homestead protection.
35.	<i>Mir-ang</i>	Twig	<i>Peng Arnam</i>	Familial protection.
36.	<i>Maharlosum</i>	Leaves	—	To cure a protruding man.
37.	<i>Chorlengso</i>	Twigs	<i>Dor</i>	To prevent epidemic disease.
38.	<i>Ingthum</i>	Leaves	<i>Ingthum</i>	To cure boils.
39.	<i>Cheri</i>	Twigs	<i>Duikhrai</i>	To nullify the influence of evil spirit in sacred groves.
40.	<i>Phang</i>	Leaves	<i>Vo phang phang aseh</i>	Child health perspective.
41.	<i>Hi-i-ar-ipak</i>	Leaves	<i>Toksari</i>	Prevent frightened dreams.
42.	<i>Chilimpui</i>	Entire plant	<i>Chokorbura</i>	Protection of entire family.
43.	<i>Bong</i>	Shell	<i>In every ritual</i>	For offering rice beer to Deities.
44.	<i>Bab kangsam</i>	Twigs	<i>Lamkeh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
45.	<i>Bancheh</i>	Entire plant	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
46.	<i>Sibu</i>	Entire plant	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
47.	<i>Tarme</i>	Leaves	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To redress the curses of enemy.
48.	<i>Phlom phlom</i>	Entire plant	<i>Ajo aseh</i>	To protect the family from the influence of evil spirit.
49.	<i>Langdun lathe</i>	Leaves and flower.	<i>In every ritual</i>	To appease supernatural power.
50.	<i>Mirkem</i>	Entire plant	<i>Death ceremony</i>	Prevent any evil effect.

Source: Field study, 2011-2013.

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