

Oral History Discourse in Northeast India Revisiting the Cultural Past of the Karbis

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Abstract

This paper stated that the so-called mainstream historians use the tools of history in order to control the perspective of the people which contends oral history traditions. It is also reflected in the context of Karbi tribe. Karbi tribe is the major ethnic community inhabiting the district of Karbi Anglong of Assam in northeast India. This paper explores a wide range of questions relating to the formation of historical consciousness and collective memory which plays a vital role in construction of cultural past of the Karbis. This paper aims to explore not only trajectories of the past but also the role of plural narratives of the Karbis influence in shaping historical past and contesting itself in diverse forms of ideas involved in oral history tradition. Thus, this paper argues that oral history of the Karbis explores the diverse ways in which the past shapes the present and is shaped by present perceptions.

Keywords: *Oral History, Memory, Oral Narrative, Cultural Past, Karbi Anglong*

Introduction

Oral history is the practice of collecting, preserving, interpreting, and shaping individual, social, and collective experiences in form of memories and metaphors. The practice of telling, recording, and writing drawn from oral stories, performances, and other narrative forms dates back at least to Herodotus of Greek historiography and is probably an activity as old as language itself. Oral history is not folklore, gossip and rumor, but the real history of people translate from their perspectives, as they remember it. It involves the systematic collection of living people's stories of their own experiences. Oral history is a complex and multi-vocal genre in which multiple perspectives, ideologies, and narratives create a mixture of memory and metaphor that reveals the complex ideas in the past as well as in the present.

In contemporary academic discourses, the concept of memory is often used rather broadly in oral history of the ethnic communities. For this reason, the clarification of the range of the historical meaning of the concept of memory is a very important and urgent task. Moreover, in the discourse of modernity memory has taken on one of the most distinctive features of reason. It is thought of as capable not only of recollecting past events and meanings, but also itself. In this respect, this study can be also taken as a reflective philosophical attempt by collective memory to recall itself, its functioning and transformations throughout its own history. In this context we need to address certain question such as how do we remembered the past, and

in what form? Does this remembrances change, and, if so, what does this tell us about our collective consciousness and cultural past? In the recent past, historians began to explore the way in which the historical events are publicly remembered.

In this context, this paper will examine the ways that Karbis have remembered the past particularly cultural past through oral history that explores memory and metaphors which are always reflected and shaped their mode of behavior. Karbi tribe is the major ethnic community inhabiting the district of Karbi Anglong of Assam in northeast India. They are also found in other district of Assam Such as Nagoan, Sonitpur, Golaghat, N.C Hills and Cachar. So far as language classification of the ethnic community is concerned it is an accepted modern notion that the Karbis belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and that they are among the oldest inhabitants of Assam. They were earlier referred to as 'Mikirs' by 'others' such as the colonial authorities and the Assamese intellectuals in order to dehumanize their identity and history but they call themselves *Arleng* meaning 'men' (Edward Stack & Charles Lyall, 1908). However, the word Karbi is a most popular in academic circles of northeast India.

Written Text and the Problem of 'Othering'

The construction of the cultural past of the tribe is not a fortuitous concern. It has evolved through several forces in the past (Vulli Dhanaraju & RK Bijeta, 2019; Hansepi, Junmoni & Dhaanraju, Vulli, 2017). Therefore, an understanding of present cultural past of the tribes will certainly lead to the study of their past. However, reconstruction of their history is a very difficult task, accurately because they have had no written records by themselves. It is to mentioned here that whatever limited sources are available about Karbis, they are written by 'others' such as colonial ethnographers, Assamese and Bengali writers with different interests and compulsions. However, these are mostly divorced from the objective and subjective conditions of the Karbis.

However, during the British period the colonial ethnographers such as B.C. Allen (1901 & 1905), Edward Stack and Charles Lyall, (1908), G. D. Walker (1925) and some American Baptist Christian missionary personalities such as Miles Bronson (1812-1883), W. Ward (1937-1929) etc. had given some references about Karbi history through personal contacts with the people. These records can be considered as colonial writings for the study of Karbis. Some Indian scholars like P.C. Choudhary (1944 & 1959), K.L. Baruah (1966), and S.K Chatterjee (1974) have also written about Karbis but they did so in a derogatory manner. For instance, S.K. Chatterjee's use of the term to refer to 'Indo-Mongoloid tribes' (Karbhis included) as 'Kirata jana' describing those living in mountainous regions as the 'sons of rakshasa'. The deprecating nature of 'academic discourse' on the Karbis is a major reason which of late has led some scholars from this community to take up research on their own. For instance, Dharamsing Teron's four volumes of *Karbi Studies* (2008, 2011 & 2012) initiated the academic mission in order to reconstruct Karbi history from oral history perspective. He is one of the eminent oral historians who has been working on the oral traditions of the Karbis since long time. Recently he has started the *Centre for Karbi Studies* together with a young group of scholars as an academic and research centre with the core objective of exploration of history, migration, oral traditions, culture, and identity of Karbis. His works are introductory at best and one can understand the silences, selectivity and defiance that he encountered.

Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (2003), in their *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, argue that the narrated pasts always lead to controversy. Despite the debate on the contested pasts, they try to pose questions on what the past can do to the present. They argue that our understanding of the past has strategic, political and ethical consequences. Contest over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward. They state that, in this struggle for the accuracy of the past, there are various institutions engaged in the repeated transformations of the past. Esther Bensadon (2013) has criticized the use of objective nature of written sources. She argues that oral transmission of knowledge occurs at many points in the process of historical knowledge and it, therefore, seems strange that history as a discipline has not paid considerable attention to oral narratives. Although historians are first preoccupied with written sources and evidences useful to their research, they are often introduced through conversation and oral advice. Interviews and evidential sources first given through voices are also abundant in archives. When a historian finds written sources in dusty archives he or she does not always pay considerable attention to the transformations the document has undergone through the years. The analysis of documents or images can however reveal if they are false, changed for political, personal or written for a purpose. In this context, recent scholars point out that it is, therefore, astonishing that ever since historians acknowledge the consequent unreliability of written sources, the discipline did not start analyzing oral sources as much as those physically and materially touchable. It is believed that while oral narratives about the past are constantly informed and molded for the purpose of the present, written evidences are not subject to as many changes once stashed away in an archive.

Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (1999), in *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-century History and Theory*, also express arguments similar to Michel Foucault's notion of power: "History writing can be a form of power: we use our knowledge to control and domesticate the past, although it is only one past. Since all history must be present-centred, we create the way in which people think about the present through our creative fictions (for they can be no other) concerning the past". They mainly argue that the historians who write the past history they can easily manipulate the past with use of their knowledge to control the people's views on the historical past.

Oral history tradition in this sense holds out hopes for understanding the historical evolutions of those societies without recorded history and where beginnings might have to be made with interpretation of the legends, myths and folklore. However, this should be admitted that there is a density in the context of Karbis. Though the Europeans were the first to write about the Karbis, their ways of life and their myths and traditions, the validity of the information given by them, especially their transcript versions of the oral traditions of the Karbis remain suspect. This skepticism complements Samuel's arguments that the "spoken word can easily be mutilated when it is taken down in writing and transferred to the printed page" (Raphael Samuel, 1998). To quote Judith Moyer (1993), as "trained to depend on written records, traditional historians have been known to shudder in horror at the potential problems and inherent weaknesses of oral history. What of the failings of human memory? What of the human tendency to impose a narrative structure on events that may not be closely connected? What of the self-serving motives of the story teller? What of the power relationships between interviewer and interviewee that affect what and how events are reported? What of the difference between the

spoken and written word? What of the inaccuracies that creep into meaning when trying to put a conversation onto paper?" In this context, the written tradition is seen to be emerging as the stronger contender as transcribed oral tradition becomes a static source. Moreover, there are opinions that oral traditions in course of time either become too exaggerated, insignificant, or forgotten.

It is almost unfeasible to find out where the Karbis came from and how their identity is formed. Historiography is obscure regarding the origin of Karbis even today. They did not settle in a single place for a long time. Largely they were shifting cultivators. Once the farming of land started losing its productivity, they would leave it uncultivated and migrate to other places. In the course of history, even their ancestors had forgotten their origin. However, a few prominent personalities generated their past through memory and metaphor. But in the course of time, these memories started getting distorted.

The Karbis along with other indigenous community entered Assam from central Asia in one of the wave of migration. Recent studies have stated that "a series of migration brought the Mongoloids to northeast India from the North, Northeast and Southeast. But, it is very difficult to trace the history of the early settlement of the Karbis bereft of any written documents and other evidence like the archeological remains, etc. of course in the old chronicles and *Assamese Buranjis* occasionally references here and there are made to the people of this community. But this reference also it is very difficult to trace the chronological events of the Karbis.

There are prevalent narratives about the Karbi migration in the existing literature. The existing oral narratives of the Karbis stated that "during the long past, once they use to live on the bank of the rivers the Kalang and Klopil and the entire regions, where the famous National Park of Assam is located. During the reigns of the Kachari King, they were driven to the hill and some of them entered into Jaintia hills, the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and live under the Jaintia suzerainty. While a section of the Karbis remained in Jaintia Kingdom, other move towards northeast by crossing river Brapani, a tributary of the Kapili and entered into the Rongkhang Range. There they established their capital at the place called Socheng. Those who continued to live under the suzerainty of the Jaintia king had to face constant harassment at the hands of the Jaintias and this had compelled them to migrated north ward. A good number of them have entered into the Ahom territory. The Karbi who migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face the Burmese invasion. The Karbi at that time took refuge in the deep jungle and high hill. In order to save themselves from the greedy eye of the Burmese invaders, the young Karbis girl started to use a black line from there forehead to the chin which is known as *Duk* with a view to make them ugly. While some of them migrated to lower Assam, some have crossed the Bhrmaputra and settled in the north bank. From the point of inhabitation, the Karbi are divided into three groups namely Chingthong, Rongkhang and Amri". Even these narratives could not escape its own silences and selectivity and defiance of the presence of its own margin. The approaches above offer a very wide and generalized idea about the migration of the Karbis. That is the reason why the oral history should be used as tool of methodology for the exploration of cultural past of the Karbis.

Thus, this paper argues that the written tradition is seen to be emerging as the stronger contender as transcribed oral tradition becomes a static source. Moreover, there are opinions that oral traditions in course of time either become too exaggerated, insignificant, or forgotten.

Recalling the Historical Past through Oral Narratives

D.D. Kosambi (1962 & 1965) said that Indian historiography failed to address certain smaller communities and put them in proper historical sense. The main reason for this is that Indian historiography lacks 'historical sense'. This is partly due to the fact that traditional Indian historiography pays little attention on ethnic communities and their cultures that led to distortion of the history of ethnic communities. As a result many communities were excluded in the academic discourse of Indian history. This also can be seen in the writings on Karbis. Fascinatingly, recently Karbi scholars are trying to explore history of their community with the help of migrational memories that comes from the oral traditions of '*Mosera Kihir*' (Recounting the Past) with secondary information from the 'Kecharhe' (funeral dirge).

It is accepted notion among the Karbis that *Mosera Kihir* is one of the lengthiest folk narratives which describe the origin and migration story of the Karbi. *Mosera* is sung in the occasion of *Riso Chojun* and in a funeral ritual called *Thi Karhi* or *Chomangkan*. The rituals are inalienable component of Karbi culture. In Karbi society ritual and custom are associated with festival which is link to their day to day life and for the community welfare. Ritual and festival which are mostly perform are mainly for the welfare of the society from birth to death which include rich harvest, for good health or general prospective and welfare, illness and epidemic or to eternalize behaviors, actions and occasions, this festival and ritual have remain the test of time as an occasion of joy and entertainment held the community together and strengthen the identity. This ritual and festival symbolized how the Karbi uphold and negotiate with time to represent them in diverse from past to present. The Karbi society is blended with folk-lore, folks-song and folk-tales. Therefore, most of the traditional ceremonies and festivals are done through religious mysteries. One of the very important factors in any of the ritual of the Karbis is the remembering the ancestor with honored. In death ceremonies of the Karbis they perform *Chomangkan* where a special ritual also performs called *Chamburuk-so kangduk*. To plead their ancestor during *Chomangkan* ceremony, Chojun is performed in remembering to their ancestor and worship to a great god, *Adsam Asar* is a ritual performed on the occasion of marriage. These rituals symbolised how the Karbi uphold and negotiate with time to time represent them diverse from past to present.

In this context Dharamsing Teron (2008) argues that "there was a time when a Karbi forefather could speak in endless verses - the language he so fluently used to express his world views, his religion, and to communicate with his exotic surrounding and his descendants. The Karbi forefather's verses, sung in simple repetitive tones but in strict metrical order, told tales of creation of the universe, the origin of the first Karbi parents, the elaborate wedding and funerary rituals, the ordeal of migration and so on. In fact, the vast collection of Karbi oral tradition touches upon every aspect of the tribe's ways of life. In spite of the lack of documentation, these verses have managed to survive in rural Karbi Anglong to this day. The Karbi 'history', therefore, continues to be trapped in the realm of myths, legends and hearsays". He felt that personal accounts of migration and settlement of the Karbis in the present Karbi Anglong are important sources of history. They are cherished memories to hand on from one generation to the next, and they add the voice of real experiences to the texture of larger histories of the Karbis. Recent subaltern historians also argue that history has to be re-explored in order to produce deconstructive and counter-historical discourse that aims to re-examining dominant history and

exposing its elitist bias by focusing attention on marginalized locations. It is mandatory to deconstruct the cultural history and rewriting the dominant narratives and replacing them with the local tribal myths, which are drawn from oral histories, folk songs, folklores and legends. The ethnic communities are always subject to the dominance of the 'other', even when they rebel and rise up. According to the subaltern school of historians, Indian history has always been dominated by elitism. It has originated as an ideological product of the ruling elite. And so it attributes all the major achievements in the history of the Indian nation to the elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas. They problematise the ideological appropriation of history and make an attempt to highlight the contribution of the marginal classes and groups in the making of history. Recent works of Vulli Dhanaraju (2016 and 2016a) have also emphasized that the study of 'plural voices of marginal communities' have become an academic discourse that find out the gaps and lacunae in the tasks of evaluation of meta-historical writings in contemporary India.

Multiple Oral Narratives

One of the important characteristic features of Karbi oral history is that there are multiple oral narratives speak about the historical migration of the Karbis presented by Karbis themselves. These narratives produce plural versions of Karbi history. Esther Bensadon (2013) has pointed out that many oral narratives passed on from generation to generation relate to the communities' environment and symbolic spaces. They can inform of relations between groups or between states and minorities and a group's perception and construction of identity. Narratives can also present the importance attached to remembering certain things and forgetting others. Joelle Bahloul (1996) has stated that remembering space and place, an important aspect of migration narratives, for instance, participate in 'symbolically restoring the integrity of a shattered geography'. The reconstruction of the past through narratives is especially important for migrant communities who do not fit the official and mainstream historical consciousness of their territory.

It is very much relevant to present multiple oral narratives explored by Dharamsing through his Karbi Studies.

Narrative-1

The first oral narrative mentioned that "a Karbi had left his home after lighting a fire in the hearth inside the house. In Karbi 'Me-AA-Kar' means to light a fire and 'Bi' means to leave. His wife, who was out of the house, saw from a distance that her husband had left the house without extinguishing the fire which might result in burning the whole homestead. She asked him - 'Me akar chonghoi bi kangkok?' From the 'mistake' committed by the ancestors, the descendants were known as 'me akar bi' and in course of time, came to be known as 'Karbi'". This is a fantastic explanation but really very difficult to establish the authenticity.

Narrative-2

The second oral narrative argues that "Borli-e, a Karbi forefather - his son once suffered from a serious illness. Borli-e worshipped *Hemphu*, the family deity for the recovery of his son. His daughter-in-law was through a labour pain at that time. Borli-e instructed a *spirit*, Panjak, to help in the process of the delivery. Panjak agreed. But at the time of the feast, food could not be offered to Panjak as she was hiding from public eye. *Hemphu* noticed this when the feast was almost over and offered a portion from his food. Others followed suit seeing *Hemphu*. The

people introduced themselves as ‘Thekar Kibi Aso’.” Karbi is a derivative from this. The practice of offering a portion of food to Karbi deities still continues and ‘Karbi’ as the shortened form of ‘*thekar-kibi*’ is now generally accepted.

Narrative-3

The third narrative stated that “*Hemphu* and *Mukrang* created Karbi to their likeness after the creation of the earth. The land was obtained from the king of earthworms. To hold the land together, spiders helped the Gods. While the king of earthworms did not ask for any reward in return, the spider king demanded that its members on earth be kept the happiest of all creatures.” The fourth narrative, according to ‘Sabin Alun’ (Karbi Ramayana) tradition, describes that ‘the Karbis consider themselves to be the descendants of Sugriva, the great hero of the Ramayana who had helped Rama with his subjects to fight against the demon king Ravana for the purpose of rescuing Sita’. The existence of Ramayana story in various ethnic communities outside the established Hindu culture and the Sugriva-descendent theory merits further investigation. However, it is interesting to note that ‘Sabin Alun’ is not uniformly distributed among Karbis living in different regions of Assam. For instance, the Kamrup Karbis who are among the closest neighbours of the Assamese and their culture do not have any ‘Sabin Alun’ tradition, so also among the Karbis of Umrongso in North Cachar Hills.

Narrative-4

The fourth narrative argues that the folktales and folklore are the only sources for the early history of the Karbis. The folklore of the Karbis, however, indicates that during the time long past, once they used to live on the banks of the rivers *Kalang* and *Kopili* and the entire regions, where the famous National Park of Assam is located. During the reigns of the Kachari Kings, they were driven to the hills and some of them entered into Jaintia hills, the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom and lived under the Jaintia suzerainty (Edward Stack & Charles Lyall, 1908). While a section of the Karbis remained in Jaintia Kingdom, others moved towards northeast by crossing River Barapani, a tributary of the *Kopili* and entered into the Rongkhang range. Accordingly, they established their capital at the place called *Socheng*. Those who continued to live under the suzerainty of the Jaintia king had to face constant harassment at the hands of the Jaintias and this had compelled them to migrate northward. A good number of them have entered into the Ahom territory. The branch of Karbis which migrated to the Ahom kingdom had to face the Burmese invasion. The Karbis at that time took refuge in the deep forest and high hill. Many Assamese also took refuge with the Karbis and reported to have become Karbis. According to a tradition, in order to save themselves from the greedy eyes of the Burmese invaders, young Karbis girls started to use a black line from their forehead to the chin known as *Duk* with a view to make them ugly. While some of them migrated to lower Assam, some crossed the Brahmaputra and settled in the north bank. From the point of habitation, the Karbis are divided into various groups, namely *Chingthong*, *Ronghang*, *Killing* and *Amri* within the ‘Hill’ group and *Dumra* in the ‘Plains’ group.

Narrative-5

This narrative argues that the Karbis in the long past migrated from near the Kuki-Chin area particularly the Chindwin river valley of western Myanmar. From there they first moved towards north and then north-west, thus gradually entering the hill areas of northern Manipur and southern Nagaland. On further westward migration, they came to occupy the valleys and low

hills of Maibang possibly. When the Kachari kings fully established their settlement in and around Maibang and Diyung valley, the Karbis could no longer live there peacefully. The Kachari chiefs used to oppress the Karbis, and then they gradually shifted their settlements towards the west to the valley of Kopili where they are believed to have lived somewhat peacefully for quite some time. In due course of time, the Karbis had another phase of migration downstream along the course of the Kopili which they were believed to have crossed to the other bank at the Doyangmukh. Consequently they gradually spread throughout the entire area of Hamren sub-division and said to have founded their famous kingdom called Rongkhang. Although the Karbi settlements were never fixed or permanently established in a place in the true sense of the term yet there were a good number of permanent settlements, especially the capital settlements such as *Socheng*.

Narrative-6

The following small narratives help us to know the sources origin of food in Karbis society. The narrative of the origin of paddy is called *Lokhi Keplang Alun*. According to this narrative, *lokhi*, the goddess of wealth descended from heaven to earth by the request of Songsar Recho in order to rescue the human beings on earth from starvation. So, they descended from heaven to earth in the guise of two damsels known as Rekathi Veso and Rekathi Dimro. The oral narrative describes the tale behind the origin of paddy. "*Chu pirbee thavi akolang, Teron Rongsopo krongjang*".... It was the time when the mother earth was young. It was believed that the two daughters of Barithe, the god of the heaven descended from heaven to earth to enjoy the wedding ceremony so-called *Adam Asar* held at Teron Rongsopo, the first ever Karbi village located to Pengja Rongnihang. At first they were not allowed to descend from heaven. However, her father later allowed them to enjoy it. It was the time when there was no rice and vegetables to eat and cloth to wear it. Rekathi Dimro and Rekathi Veso enjoyed and very much appreciated about it. But on the occasion they observed that there was no vegetable and rice to eat. And also there was no cloth to put on. Therefore, the Karbi people used to eat a creeper called *Sinning Angkor* as vegetable and *Longle Angkor* as rice. And as such Rekathi Veso and Rekathi Dimro were brooding for the matter. With this the Goddess of wealth descended from heaven to earth in the guise of two damsels named Rekathi Veso and Rekathi Dimro send them to the river bank of Kuleng. They were taking bath and playing with water by swimming hither and thither.

One day Harbamon, the village Sarthe of Teron Rongsopo had a dream and he informs to his subjects that Rekhathi Veso and Rekathi Dimro descended from heaven and stayed on a river bank. It was the dream of Harbamon. The village Sarthe determined to bring them to his village. He even publicly declared who could bring them to his village he would allow someone to marry with his daughter. In the order of the village Sarthe, the youths of Teron Rongsopo went out the village to persuade the goddesses of wealth Rekathi Veso and Rekathi crossed the river bank with the help of bamboo boat. But most of them died when the both capsized in the river and only survived an energetic and dynamic young named Ron Singpo Marang. He could possible cross the river bank and then climbed up the big *Cheri Arong* (peepal tree) and caught hold of its branch then saw them on the river bank of Kuleng. Reaching there, the youth was fervently requesting them to step into the village of Teron Rongsopo. They also agreed to come to the village. But they told Ron Singpo the difficulty to go to the village in the form of goddesses. So, Rekathi Veso and Rekathi Dimro transformed into fruit of *Cheri Arong* (peepal tree). Ron Singpo brought the fruit to his grip and crossing the river. Unfortunately, the fruit gone out of his grip and fell into the river and swallowed by a big fish of the river.

One day the fisherman called Kuki Chindaipo went to river for fishing. A big fish caught in his net and brought it to his house. When he cut the fish into pieces a glittering and good looking fruit was found in his stomach. However, he planted it on the ground of his compound and in course of time a sampling of flower plant germinated from there. And sapling had gradually been growing up to flowering plant and in due time bore a flower. It was blooming in the compound of the house. In the meantime, Harbamon also heard the news about it. He was also desire to bring it to his village anyhow. Hence one day the spouse along with their son came out the village to visit to the house of Kuki Chindaipo on the pretext for pleading dry fishes from there. They reached the house of the fisherman and there the child suddenly saw a blooming flower in the compound of the house. He wanted to have it. On the other hand, Kuki Chindaipo did not allow them to pluck it. The child began to cry for it. They were persuading him to divert his attention from the flower to another, but it gone in vain. At last Kuki Chindaipo reluctantly allowed them to pluck it and gave a flower to him. The son of Teron Rongsopo was possible to bring to Goddesses of wealth to the village by Ron Singpo Marang in the guise of blooming flower. It was believed that they cultivated the seed of the flower in the field and later was cooked for tasting, gave it to a dog to eat. They did not die, to be double sure of the wholeness of the fruit they gave it to a very old woman, instead of dying, the dog and women become stronger.

Thus, finding the fruit to be good, they cooked it a larger quantity and had a tasteful meal. When the people, found it good to eat everyone wanted to eat rice more and more. Everyone began to say *Ne An Choji*. In Karbi language *An* means so much and *La An* means this much. Hence later it came to be called *An* in Karbi. The whole story is narrated in the song called *Lokhi Keplang Alun* which is the song of the discovery of paddy in the Karbi society.

The following oral narratives were presented with help of songs which are important to construct the historical past of the Karbis from multiple perspective.

In the Karbi society the usage of wild banana leaf is very important as the usage of fowl, fermented rice beer, ginger and bitter gourd shell in time of worship, wedding ceremony and social festivals etc. There is folk song, *Nang lochin aso, Lore aso* in the society which describes about it. In this folk song it is found the glimpses of the origin of the wild banana leaf, and it was at first descended from heaven to earth. In course of time, its seeds were sowed by the hornbills in the hills and mountains. When they were in the plains they could not grow properly at the presence of wild buffalo and rhinoceros etc. The wild animals used to trample over it. However, in the hills and mountains they could spread out their species on it. One day, the wild banana fortunately met with Rama and Laxmana while they were wandered in the jungle in exile. By the grace of Lord Rama and Laxmana gifted him the spiritual power to foretell the future destiny of human being. Since then the Karbi people used banana leaf as element for prediction.

Another folk song related to the discovery of bottle gourd (*Bong Keplang Alun*) called, *Men puthe asong ! Sengri sing pujong*... According to tradition, the gourd seeds was first discovered by Kache and Lirbon, the two damsels who were believed to be the daughters of Harlongbi (a mythical person), while they were going to the river bank called Marle to fetch

drinking water with bamboo pails. They reached there, and filled the bamboo pails with water and suddenly saw three seed lying on the ground. They picked the seeds from it and tied it up with small portion of her cloth and brought home. Reaching home, she sowed it on the ground of the house. In course of time, a creeper plant was germinated from it. The creeper plant gradually grew up and bore three kinds of fruits namely *Horbong*, *Dambong* and *Chumbong*. It is believed that it was supplied by the god of heaven through the two damsels named Kache and Lirbon. Songsar Recho, the god of the heaven knew that on earth the Karbi people were observing the traditional rite called *Adam Asar* without having the gourd shell. Hemphu wanted to introduce the important and useful thing of the gourd to the society. So, he requested Rang Mukrang, a mythical person to bring it filled in rice beer at the time of marriage of Rasinja, his sister to Long Mukrang. Since then the utility of it came into being to the society. Therefore gourd has occupied an important position in the Karbi society.

The Karbi traditional song below describes how weaving culture *Serdihun Alun* came into being in Karbi society, "*Ave loti serdhun senglong! Dehun nephan honlam kesoi neketoi*" ... This song stated that it is believed by Karbi people that Serdihun, a damsel was first ever weaver in the Karbi society when they did not know the art of weaving and spinning. To began her work of weaving she requested one of the young boys to make loom. The boy started to work at the request of Serdihun and made loom with his sharp knife. After having loom she began to weave a Karbi traditional shirt. She completed it and the boy wore the shirt and went to *Chomangkan*. His friends wanted to know the name of the weaver of the shirt, but he remained mum about it.

Thus, the Karbi folk songs play an important role in cultural representation of the past of the Karbis. These songs are basically conveying something about the way of life and represent collective identity of the community. However in the recent past the dynamics of geographical, social, economical and political changes have influenced the structure of folk-songs. The folk songs played an important role in the context of the organization of the Karbi village. *Rukasen lori! Iru inglongki pen!! Iri basapi*''... It is believed that when the Karbi did not have the knowledge to live together in the form of a village, a man name Kasen have initiated first ever organized village. To ensure his aim used to get up following the cock crowing. However he was also persuaded by his wife. So he had a discussion with a people to select a suitable place for the establishment of the village. In course of discussion, it was decided to select a place called *Nongkula* ahi and at last established a village there. The person who had initiated first to establish a village was Rukasen. In Karbi 'Ru' means grandfather and Kasen was his name. Therefore the Karbi people called him Rukasen till today. The name of the village that had been established by Rukasen was Miring Rongsopi. It was on the bank of the river Kopli and villagers fetched drinking water from there. Miring Rongsopi was a model village and the houses were constructed in two lines and there was a road passing through the village. In between village and the river there was bridle path to fetch drinking water. The river water Kopli was abundant in fishes and therefore the village people never felt the scarcity of it. Miring Rongsopi was the first village for the society organization by Rukasen. Apart from this song there are diverse songs that are still prevalent among the Karbis in relation to birth, marriage, death, women, agriculture etc. All these song are represent the way the Karbi have been shaped by the cultural past.

Conclusion

This paper mainly argues that oral history and oral tradition are not only an important source for the construction of so-called 'pre-colonial' and 'colonial' periods, it is also important for a better

understanding of cultural discourse of Karbi tribe. In this context the recovery of memory through relooking into past is an important task of the present day historians. The recent post modern historians argues about history and its representation that history is not about past, but a contested narratives of the past and history is only one aspect of narratives rather it is multiple narratives of the past. Therefore, multiple narratives need to be explored in order to understand the representation of these narratives. This paper also considers the same approach in the context of reconstruction of Karbi history with the help of memories and metaphors of the community. The construction of memory is not a representation of the past but also a 'cultural past of the community' shared by the community through many generations. It is interesting to note here that there are plural narratives in oral history of Karbis that seemingly contesting each other in construction of their history Karbis. Therefore, this paper helps us to explore plural narratives of the Karbi oral history which plays an important role in academic discourse of northeast India.

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