



October 2011

## Eco-Cosmologies and Biodiversity Conservation: Continuity and Change among the Karbis of Assam

Ujjal Kumar Sarma

*Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM)*, uks\_wildlife@yahoo.co.in

Indrani Barpujari

*The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI)*, indrani.barpujari@teri.res.in

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/iipj>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Sarma, U. K. , Barpujari, I. (2011). Eco-Cosmologies and Biodiversity Conservation: Continuity and Change among the Karbis of Assam. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 2(4) . Retrieved from: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/iipj/vol2/iss4/10>

**DOI:** 10.18584/iipj.2011.2.4.10

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Indigenous Policy Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [nspence@uwo.ca](mailto:nspence@uwo.ca).

---

# Eco-Cosmologies and Biodiversity Conservation: Continuity and Change among the Karbis of Assam

## **Abstract**

Eco-cosmologies of indigenous communities which regard the world of humans and the world of nature as closely related to each other, and rites and rituals based on such belief systems are important for the conservation of nature. The objective of this paper is to examine how the culture, particularly the cosmologies and religious beliefs of an indigenous tribal group—the Karbis living near Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India have insinuations for the conservation of natural resources. Based on fieldwork conducted in two Karbi villages, one still adhering to the traditional religion with a deep seated reverence for nature and all life forms, and the other which has converted to a new religion, the paper throws light on the changes and challenges to the indigenous ecological ethos in the present context.

## **Keywords**

Eco-Cosmology, Biodiversity Conservation, Karbis, Kaziranga National Park

## **Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Introduction: Nature-Culture-Religion in Indigenous Communities

The world view and religious beliefs of many indigenous communities living in close communion with nature are often rooted in nature and speak of affinity with the plant and animal world, which in turn leads to sustainable use and conservation of nature (Western and Wright, 1994). Parajuli (2001) uses the term *ecological ethnicity* to denote such cultures and communities that maintain the rhythm of circularly appropriate cosmovisions, observing related rituals and practicing prudence in the ways they care about nature, harvest from nature, nurture nature and are nurtured in turn. In the context of India, home to innumerable indigenous and tribal communities living near protected areas, Roy Burman (1992) observes that tribal people possess an 'indigenous wisdom', having respect for all living creatures – a wisdom that, among other things offers other communities in India a vision of future survival based on a lifestyle of harmony with nature. Arguing for their rights to live in conservation enclaves, he has proposed a definition of the 'indigenous' as

those whose livelihoods are tied up with the land in a system of mutual reinforcement – as a moral contract in which social living and negotiation with human and non-human animate beings are basically attuned to the sonic and sensual rhythms of the earth (*ibid.*,4).

Among most simple societies, as observed by anthropologists across the world, the perception of nature is contiguous with that of society. Together they constitute an integrated order, alternatively represented as a grand society or a cosmic nature. Humankind is, thus, seen as a particular form of life participating in a wider community of living beings regulated by a single and totalizing set of rules of conduct (Arhem, 1996). A similar sentiment has been echoed by Sinha (1957) when he says that

like many indigenous traditions, the religious practices of tribal societies indicate a belief that the natural universe is continuous with the human world of interactions and sentiments. The human, nature, and the supernatural are all bound in a mutual relationship (p. 46).

To cite an illustration from the world view of the Santals living in the Chotanagpur region of India, the basic assumption is that like the rest of the material world, man is made up of elements that disintegrate at death and dissolve into nature. Man is not even considered unique as regards to possession of knowledge; it is believed that primordial knowledge came to him from birds and animals and that cosmic intelligence is the self-existent source of all knowledge (Saraswati, 2001). According to Descola and Pálsson (1996) the concept of eco-cosmology may be adopted to refer to such integral models of human-nature relatedness; they have further pointed out that this new concept is also related to the classical anthropological notions of totemism and animism. Levi-Strauss (1963) has suggested that totemism is not necessarily a religious phenomenon, but rather a classificatory one. According to him, totemism is a label for certain kind of logic by which people employ the distinctions found in nature for the purpose of imposing distinctions between categories of people. Totemic designations do more than merely label persons and groups; they also establish a certain structure of relation between them.

Animism, according to Descola (1992), may be considered as the symmetrical inverse of totemism: a mode of conceptually organizing the relationship between human beings and natural species on the basis of the system of social classification. Animistic systems endow natural beings with human dispositions and social attributes; sometimes animals are attributed with 'culture'- habits, rituals, songs and dances of their own. If totemic systems model society after nature, animistic systems model nature after society. However, according to Arhem (*op.cit.*), despite the differences, both have fundamental properties in common: implying a relationship of continuity between nature and society.

Thus, they may be regarded as forming part of totalizing eco-cosmologies, integrating practical knowledge and moral values. Although the nature-society divide is meaningless for most simple societies, many cultures attribute, explicitly or implicitly, the quality of wilderness to certain portions of their environment. They thus identify a particular space beyond the direct control of humans (Oelschlaeger, 1991). Sacred spaces and sacred groves are examples of this.

It would perhaps be pertinent to start the discussion with an awareness of the pitfalls involved in taking a too romanticized perspective to the issue or a belief in an ideal 'indigenous ecological ethos'. As the only constant in the world is 'change' and as indigenous communities the world over are exposed to the various forces of the modern world, levels of ecological consciousness vary significantly with the material conditions, the nature of livelihoods, the level of technological development in which different tribal communities live and the market forces.

## **Objectives and Methodology**

Eco-cosmologies regard the world of humans and the world of nature as closely related to each other. Rituals based on such belief systems are important for the conservation of nature and wildlife, even as they undergo considerable changes. The objective of this paper is to establish the linkage between nature and culture and show how the culture, particularly the cosmologies and religious beliefs of an indigenous tribal group – the Karbis living near Kaziranga National Park, Assam, have implications for the conservation of natural resources. At the same time, the paper also dwells on the forces of change that have led to the gradual erosion of traditional belief systems, and which have had an unfavourable impact on conservation. The scope of the paper extends the study of Karbi cosmologies, belief systems, myths, concept of sacred spaces as well as rites and rituals, which have a direct or indirect relationship with biodiversity conservation. It is based on fieldwork conducted over a period of two years in 2004-05 in the villages of Inglepathar and ChandraSingh Rongpi Gaon, situated near the world-famous Kaziranga National Park. Situated in the north-eastern state of Assam, India; the Park is also renowned as the habitat of the one horned rhinoceros.

The Karbis who belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic stock constitute one of the oldest groups of inhabitants of Assam. The Karbis have been residing in and around the National Park for ages, much prior to its designation as a protected area. In fact, the very word 'Kaziranga' is believed to have Karbi origin, derived from two words 'Kazir', referring to a popular Karbi name for a girl, and 'rong', meaning village in Karbi, literally meaning the village where the Karbi girl Kazir resides. It is also believed that there were Karbi villages inside the forest that was later declared as Kaziranga National Park. The locals believe that these Karbis went to the southern hills in different waves. Inglepathar is the oldest Karbi village in the fringe of Kaziranga National Park. It is inhabited by 32 Karbi households, with the total population being 247 persons (128 males and 119 females).

The worldview of the inhabitants of Inglepathar is largely still animistic, though in recent times there has been the growth of new religious sects, inspired by Hinduism, particularly the Assamese Vaishnavite stream. The primary economic bases of the people of Inglepathar are agriculture and daily wage labour. A small percentage (about 20% of the total working population), mainly young men in the age-groups of 20-24 and 25-29 years, have taken to business as their primary occupation (including supply of bamboo, petty trade, etc.). Of the total population of 247 people, 39.68% have no formal education (the proportion of people with no formal education being highest in the age groups beyond 40 years which is 38%). The number of persons who have pursued education beyond Class X is very few (15 persons or 6.07%), and the number of graduates even fewer (2 persons or 0.8%).

Chandrasingh Rongpi Gaon is also a small village quite close to Inglepathar, with a population of 232 persons divided into 39 households. The people of Chandrasingh Rongpi Gaon are relatively recent

converts to Christianity. Both the Roman Catholic and Baptist church have a presence in the village, with about 60 % of the population affiliated to the Baptist Church and the remaining 40% are associated to the Roman Catholic Church. Majority of the people of Chandrasing Rongpigaon depend on agriculture for subsistence. In addition to agriculture, a large percentage of both men and women (75 males constituting 32.33% of the total population and 56 females comprising 24.14% of the total population) engage in secondary occupations of selling firewood and rice beer (mainly by women) and the supply of bamboo (mainly by the young men) to meet their need for ready cash. Of 232 people 25.43% (persons in the age groups beyond 40 years constituting about 23 %) have no formal education.

Data on the religious beliefs, world view and cosmologies of the Karbis have been collected using the anthropological techniques such as observation, interview and case study. Care was exercised to judiciously select key informants. It was found that the village elders, particularly the religious officiates, were knowledgeable about the traditional belief systems, while the younger generation was more interested in talking about change and the need for the community to keep pace with the recent developments. Care was taken to ensure that women informants were adequately represented in the study.

### **Karbi Religion and Worldview and The Place Of Nature**

The Karbi inhabitants of village Inglepathar largely follow the traditional Karbi religion of their forefathers, with its belief in innumerable supernatural powers both benevolent and malevolent and a deep reverence for nature and all life forms. To please these supernatural powers, they hold rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of fowls, and sometimes even goat or pig, and offerings of *harlang* (rice beer) are indispensable. Most of them were proud of such current practices and imagined themselves as the true custodians of the Karbi tradition, often considering the inhabitants of Chandrasingh Rongpi Gaon as 'contaminated' owing to their conversion to Christianity and the change to their world view.

Though Christianity has not been able to make its presence felt in the village like the neighbouring Karbi Village Chandrasingh Rongpi Gaon, Karbi religion here has been influenced to a great extent by Hinduism. Hinduism has found its manifestation in the village in the form of worship of gods of the Hindu pantheon like Durga, Lakshmi, Shiva and Vishnu and these deities are worshipped in a temple located inside the village. This is a new phenomenon considering the fact that temples were never part of Karbi religion. Also, strong influence of Vaishnavism (a form of Hinduism; adherents of which believe in Vishnu, as the one God) is noticed in the form of devotion of a large section of the villagers to a sect based on Vaishnavite principles – the *Lakhiman Sangha*.

In contrast, in the case of Chandrasingh Rongpi Gaon's conversion to Christianity, the community no longer propitiates supernatural powers, both benevolent and malevolent, as done by their ancestors through offerings of *harlang* and animal sacrifices. Concepts like sacred trees, sacred forests, sacred animals and sacred streams, as prevalent as they are among the neighbouring Karbis of Inglepathar, are fast fading away in Chandrasing Rongpi Gaon. Nevertheless, remnants of the old religion are still found in their midst, especially among the older generation, particularly in instances like avoiding the forests where malevolent deities are believed to reside, or relying on the traditional medicine man's incantations to ward off illness or misfortune. At the same time, some youths exhibited a condescending attitude towards the traditional Karbi beliefs and displayed a sense of superiority in being part of a much 'modern' religious belief system.

Contemporary Indian anthropologists like Das (2006), Srivastava (2010) have empirically observed a similar process of religious syncretism or the synthesis of different religious forms among the tribal people of India. According to Das (2010), on account of various levels of culture-contact, adoption

and interaction, the tribes of India have often borrowed cultural traits and religious practices of various sects and major religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity without being completely swallowed up by them. Srivastava (2010) observes that this assimilation into the tribal fold is particularly noticed in the case of Hindu gods and goddesses, facilitated by the nature of that religion, which is highly moldable and adaptable. In his words, "Hindus find no contradiction in believing that god is one and formless and at the same time, for instance, that a pebble or a plant is godly, deserving veneration" (p. 5).

This could perhaps provide a tentative explanation of the fact that we observed a higher degree of assimilation of Hinduism into the traditional Karbi religion. In a way, the educated and the younger generation's perceived 'superiority' of Christianity over the traditional religion comes in the form of a dialogue between the two religions, which is discussed later on in this paper.

**Myths and beliefs.** Traditionally, the Karbis believe that there is a *karjong* (soul) in every living being like humans, animals, birds, fish, insects, trees and the like. This *karjong* is also present in inanimate objects, such as water, rocks, hills, forests etc. It is due to the presence of *karjong*, which are regarded as part of the creator residing in all his creations, that the Karbis revere all life forms and all objects of supernatural creation as sacred. The Karbis believe that it is a crime to take the life of any living creature without purpose, as it possesses a *karjong*. Even when a domestic creature like fowl, goat or pig is killed for food, a small ritual is observed to ask pardon from the gods and to ensure that no sin is attached to humans. To kill such an animal, *lo-alun* or a banana leaf is spread on the courtyard. *Aan* or rice is sprinkled on the neck before slitting it with a sharp knife. This is to ensure that Goddess *Lakshmi* symbolized by the rice takes the blame. This again is a strong reflection of Hindu influence where the goddess Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth in Hindu mythology) has come to be an important deity of the Karbi pantheon.

The inhabitants of Inglepathar believe that death means the absence of *karjong* from the body. At death *Chom*, who is the soul-giver, takes away the soul from the mortal world to *Chom-Arong*. Since other creatures except humans are free from sin, *Chom* takes them directly to his abode. However, the *karjong* of humans, being full of sin, continues to linger around after death. It is for these reasons that elaborate rituals have to be performed on the death of person so that the soul may be bid fare-well. Langtuk Togbi, the *kurusar* (priest) narrated a myth as to how the elaborate death ritual of the Karbis called *Chomangkan*, originated and the role played by a wild lizard in it. As per this myth, there was an expert Karbi hunter *Tumung Chomar*. He used to go hunting in the forests of Karbi Anglong every day with a pack of hunting dogs. One day, in the course of his hunting, he found a female *shehang* (a kind of big lizard found in the forest, which used to be a delicacy for the Karbis). With the help of his dogs, he caught hold of the *shehang* and when he tried to kill her, she pleaded with the hunter to spare her life. In lieu, she promised to take the hunter to *Chom Arong*. The hunter granted her prayer and she took him to *Chom Arong* and there he learned all the rules and regulations that were to be observed in the performance of the death ceremony. On returning to earth, he taught these to his fellow Karbi men and, as a show of gratitude to *the shehang*, Karbi hunters from then on refrained from killing *shehangs*.

They also have the concept of rebirth or reincarnation of the soul or *karjong*. Karbis believe that human beings take rebirth as human beings and animals as animals. An exception may be there in case the deceased committed grave sins during his life-time meaning he may take rebirth in the form of an animal in his family's home. If a single puppy, piglet, duckling or chick etc. is born in the house, the Karbis believe that an ancestor of the family has taken rebirth in this form due to his past sins. Such an animal cannot be sacrificed on ritual occasions. A ritual to seek atonement for the sin of killing has to be performed (but only outside the household premises) before an animal can be killed for food. The Karbis

also believe that dead ancestors have the capacity to take the form of other animals and present himself or herself before the members of his family.

Karbi religious beliefs are also reflected in a number of myths and songs which had been passed on to them by their forefathers through the oral tradition. The study of myths of a society is considered important. Though myths are related to given facts, they are not a representation of them. However, the study of myths open the way for other possibilities. By abandoning the search for a constantly accurate picture of ethnographic reality in the myth, we gain on occasion a means of reaching unconscious categories (Levi-Strauss 1976). As per one Karbi myth, at the beginning of creation all the inhabitants of earth, including the different ethnic groups of humankind and all the animals, spoke a common language and were one united whole. On one occasion, the inhabitants of the earth, including humans and animals, tried to build a ladder to *Aakarang Sargat* (Heaven). Since the gods did not want the mortals co-habiting with them, they broke the ladder when the creatures of the earth were resting from their work. Undaunted, they started to rebuild it. In the face of their unwavering determination, the gods conspired to create discord among them. Through the use of supernatural charms, they made the mortals forget their common language, with each group now starting to speak different languages, unknown to the others. From then on the close relationship between man and animal was irreversibly broken by the conspiracy of the jealous gods. Thus, this Karbi myth is of great relevance in the sense that it lead us to conclude that the heart of the Karbi culture is permeated by a deep sense of oneness with and connection to all earthly creatures.

*Masira Kohir* is a holy song of the Karbis narrating the basic principles of creation. This song can be sung only during the death ritual *Chomangkan* and at no other time. The words of this song are to the effect that the Karbis were born under the Amara tree (*Foudiaf mangrifera*) from the egg of a mythical bird known as the *Wo Plak Pi*. The verses run to the effect that the first representatives of tribes like the Ahoms, the Khasis (whom the Karbis refer to as the Chomangs) and the Karbis were hatched out of eggs laid by this bird. This song, thus, speaks about the common origin of all ethnic groups, referring particularly to the Ahom rulers (of Assam) and the Khasis (mostly living in Meghalaya) with whom the Karbis were in close contact. Again, the song also speaks of all people as tracing their origin to a singular bird, indicative, again, of the oneness of humans and animals.

**Sacred spaces.** The Karbis of Inglepathar believe that the nearby hills, streams and forests are the abodes of spirits and gods, both benevolent and malevolent. In addition, the people believe that the souls of their ancestors prior to the performance of the elaborate death rituals linger near to the dwellings of their surviving kin in the bamboo groves. They particularly revere a hillock *Rang Le Sai*, and no insolent action like spitting, or the use of foul language is permissible once inside the forests of the hill. Very few Karbis even dare to go to the hill for the fear that they might commit some sin. Despite conversion to Christianity, elders in ChandraSingh Rongpi Gaon still believe that the forests of Central Karbi Anglong are the abode of many deities and spirits. The story of *Khenglong-po* is still vivid in the popular imagination. *Khenglong-po* is perceived to be a huge, hairy wild-man that lives in the forest of Singhason peak (the highest peak of Karbi Anglong) and has a liking for human flesh. While the younger generation scoffs at such beliefs, nevertheless, they avoid going alone into the forests where he is believed to reside and only venture there in groups.

**Sacred plants and animals.** The Karbis revere a number of plants and animal species as sacred. The plant *Garuga pinnata*, local name *Tejhi* or *Timur* is believed to possess some miraculous powers. It is believed that God first created human beings under this plant, attested to by the verses of the folk song *Karbi Kaplang*. Different clans or *kurs* revere different species as sacred and there are usually beliefs and

myths attributing some relationship with the particular plant or animal. For instance, members of the Terang clan revere the hornbill, the killing of which is believed to be a grave sin. There is a belief that the Terangs were saved from death during a severe flood by this bird. Similarly, the *Rui Teron* (a particular kind of snake) is sacred for the Teron clan, while the Togbis revere the eagle. *Lo Teron* tree in spite of being good firewood is sacred for the Teron *kur*, and hence, it a taboo for them to use it. The *Ingsung* leaves, which are bitter and taken as a vegetable by the Karbis, are sacred to the Ingti *kur* and are thus taboo for consumption.

Apart from these specific plants and animals, the Karbi people of Inglepathar also worship the cow, elephant and tiger. Again, the killing of a pregnant animal for food is tabooed. However, it is only the Karbis practicing the traditional religion who follow these taboos. Karbis who have converted to Christianity no longer believe in these restrictions and there is no taboo on their eating any plant and animal, if so desired.

**Rituals associated with nature.** The people of Inglepathar perform many rituals associated with nature. *Wophong Rongker* is performed for the well-being of not only the village but for all the neighbouring Karbi and non-Karbi population as well. It is believed that the performance of *Wophong Rongker* protects the agricultural lands from the ravages of floods and ensures timely rain. The venue for the performance of *Wophong Rongker* is the *Wophong Rongker than* (a stone shrine surrounded by a patch of forest – a sacred grove) situated in the nearby hill just outside the village. It is taboo to even pluck fruits from the trees of the *than*. To seek protection against the wild animals of the nearby Kaziranga National Park and its contiguous forests, the Karbi inhabitants of Inglepathar perform the *Chinthong Arnam*. They believe that the soul of a person who has died as a result of attack by a tiger is unredeemable. *Chinthong* is that deity of the Karbis who offers protection against the *bongkrui* (tiger). As such, he commands much awe and reverence in the hearts of the people. He is propitiated through the performance of the ritual *Chinthong Arnam*.

*Rong Arnam* is another ritual observed during the month of *Matizang* (December) for the protection of the whole village against *ingnar* (elephants) and *bongkrui* (tigers). During this ritual, the deities are prayed to not only for the protection of human beings but also for the safety of the domestic animals. This ritual is performed in only three households of the village belonging to the priestly *kur* (clan) of the Karbis. It is obligatory for these households to perform *Rong Arnam* every year; non-performance is believed to incur divine wrath upon the village. According to Karbi traditional belief, when a tiger or an elephant kills a man, it is believed to be the curse of *Unteron* (the planet Saturn). The deceased as well as his village is considered to get polluted and this kind of ritual pollution is known among the Karbis as *Ani* or *Sani Kanti*. The dead person as well as the people performing the death rites and the whole village needs to be purified through the performance of *Hemphu Kecham Puja*. This ritual is usually performed by a special priest called the *Khakre*. Interestingly, the belief still finds its existence among the older generation of Chandrasing Rongpigaon. There have been instances where before the burial as per the requirement of Christianity, the family members got *Hemphu Kecham Puja* done in privacy by a *Khakre*. Most of the youths, however, were embarrassed when asked about the same and they quickly put it aside as superstitious beliefs of the old and illiterate generations.

The people of Chandrasing Rongpigaon celebrate with great fervour the Christian festival of Christmas and they also observe Easter. They have given up almost all their earlier, indigenous rituals with one or two exceptions. They still perform, albeit in a modified manner, some of the rituals associated with nature and agriculture. Before eating the first bamboo shoots of the season, for instance, the Chandrasing Rongpigaons still perform the ritual of *San-ki-mi-kechu* by making offerings of the same to the supernatural deities of the forests that had nurtured the bamboo trees. *Rongker*, the annual Karbi harvest festival is still observed, too. However, its celebrations have been reduced mainly

to an event where the people of the village come together for a community feast and participate in cultural events. Women take active part in all the events here: this is in sharp contrast to the *Rongker* in Inglepathar where women are not allowed to participate. The sacrifices and rituals which mark *Rongker* in Inglepathar are no longer performed here. This is an indication of the fact that despite the influence of Christianity, remnants of earlier beliefs and worldview still linger on in some way or other.

### **Nature-Culture Relationship in the Time of Change**

From the above discussion, it, thus, emerges that the Karbis have a deep-feeling of oneness with the natural world; and that regulation of natural resources receives a central focus in eco-cosmologies acknowledging the intimate relationship with man and nature. They, thus, believe in the same, singular soul pervading all life on earth. There is also recognition of symbiotic relationship between various life forms. This explains in part at least why they have strict rules, religious sanctions and taboos to protect these manifestations. All life forms are sacred, and the act of killing for food or for rituals is accompanied by the seeking of pardon for the sin.

However, despite the entrenchment of a remarkable conservation ethos in the Karbis eco-cosmology and world view, there are many changes taking place under the impact of the forces of modernisation, market economy and abandoning traditional religion. The Karbis, like most indigenous peoples face an ongoing threat both to the continuity of their culture and to the security of their physical survival. The character of their 'green' consciousness is, therefore, materially different from that of their ancestors. Despite there being a close connection between nature and religion among the Karbis of Inglepathar and to some extent in Chandrasingh Rongigaon, the data on the occupational pattern (dealt with in the methodology) indicate that the youths of both the villages increasingly are being drawn to the lucrative trade of forest produce, such as supplying bamboo to the paper mills, which has resulted in very high levels of deforestation in recent times. The issue is not extraction of bamboo *per se*, but the way it is extracted which is unsustainable. Often, in the process of cutting and transporting bamboo clumps, a large number of herbs, roots, tubers etc. which otherwise have played an extremely important role in traditional medicine systems as well as food are getting lost. The forests that used to be in the backyard have moved away. From being the resource pool, for medicinal plants, nutritious edible wild roots, shoots and vegetables, etc., forests are being considered more and more as a source of money. The dependency on money and market is increasing with each day and soon many more items of daily use will have to be procured from the market with money. At the same time the role of women, who used to collect seasonal herbs, roots, tubers from the nearby forests, is undergoing rapid change. Also, traditionally such indigenous were used in their every day diet following precise recipes guarded well by the community (mostly by women). Gradually, they are being lost. Similarly the role of the traditional medicine men, who used to treat common ailments with a combination of divination, medicinal plants and some sacred chanting, is also changing, owing to a preference for modern medicine. The combined effect is weakening the Karbis' traditional belief system and eco-cosmology. Further, the unsustainable use of forest resources has also disturbed the ecosystem and modified the landscape, limiting home range of various wild animals. This in turn has led to increased instances of man-animal conflict in recent times (WWF-India, 2004).

In addition, the compulsions of a monetized economy have led to changes in perspectives among local communities. There are new demands, challenges and opportunities. The list of items for day to day consumption that could have been acquired without money is decreasing with each day. On one hand, money has opened a new world. On the other hand, it is slowly closing the door to a world that the Karbis always trusted and have tested under different circumstances. The money earned from forest produce is used to explore a new world and get a taste of the 'other culture'.

Apart from money the sense of alienation from the forests, which was considered common property resource before the advent of the modern conservation movement, is worth considering. With a majority of the population in both villages being mostly illiterate, they have not been able to tap the opportunities following the declaration of Kaziranga as a national park. The *Gaonburha* (village headman) who otherwise would have had a say in the common resource (forests in this case), today also works as a daily wage labourer for the Forest Department. From being custodians of the forest they have become outsiders without any say in its governance.

Also, as discussed early on in this paper, is recent conversions to Christianity, as in the case of the Karbis of Chandrasing Rongpigaon. Christina conversion has diluted the Karbis traditional belief system and the conservation ethos it supported. The disruptive impact of the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries on the social and religious ecology of the people of Arunachal Pradesh has been well documented. Rustomji (1988) citing Elwin has remarked that

the attitude of some missionaries has been completely destructive of the tribal culture. To them everything which is not Christian is 'heathen' and some of the finest aspects of tribal life have been abandoned... The tribal[... people]s have been taught to despise their past and as a result a strong inferiority complex has been created. (p.25)

This is true to some extent in the context of Chandrasing Rongpi Gaon where many young people interviewed tended to dismiss the indigenous practices as mere superstitions of the mostly illiterate, older people. Some youths exhibited a sense of shame regarding traditional Karbi practices of ritual sacrifices and belief in 'so many gods'.

## The Way Ahead

The above findings lead us to conclude that, while in the past, the traditional eco-cosmologies, beliefs and practices of the Karbis based on the central idea of man-nature relatedness ensured biodiversity conservation, there are numerous forces or agents of change at work in the modern context that undermine this worldview. It is very difficult to predict whether these rich biocultural traditions will be able to survive and thrive among younger generations, many of whom view these as superstitions propagated by illiterate, older generations. However, despite the erosion of these traditions and other changes, communities like the Karbis can still play a substantial part in forest governance which, however, depends critically upon matters apart from the forest itself. Hope lies in reviving community ownership, providing increased relevance and powers to traditional Karbi socio-economic institutions, responsible 'eco-tourism' with tangible benefits to the community, promotion of self help groups, of tribal arts and crafts, linking sacred forests to carbon sequestration and recognition as a repository of biodiversity and areas for enrichment of aquifers - all of which provide the community with a legitimate stake in conservation of the Park and its surrounding forests (in contrast to the generally exclusionary basis of a Protected Area).

Though in very rudimentary stages, isolated Karbi social movements working to revitalize the nature-culture link, like Lakhiman Sangha in Ingepathar, have some optimism for the future. While constituting a significant departure from the traditional Karbi religion in that they shun the prohibitively expensive traditional rituals involving sacrifice of large number of animals and exhibit strong influence of the Vaishnavism practiced by their Assamese neighbours, the sect advocates great tolerance and reverence for forests and wildlife. This ecological ethos, in the midst of rapid changes to Karbi society, its world view and its aspirations, could be channeled and incorporated into an inclusive conservation strategy for biodiversity and wildlife. A 'win-win' or reconciliation ecology policy strategy, in which

humans coexist with nature and accept responsibility for both its use and protection (Rosenzweig, 2003; Geisler, 2010), might offer some hope for the future of both the Kaziranga National Park and the Karbis. The traditional attachment of the Karbis to the Park, their intimate knowledge of it as well as their deep-rooted conservation ethos could be harnessed to support the conservation of the Park, with the Park providing economic and other opportunities in turn for the sustenance of the Karbis in a modern, monetized economy.

## References

- Arhem, K. (1996). The cosmic food web: Human - nature relatedness in the Northwest Amazon. In P. Descola, G. Pálsson (Eds.), *Nature and society: Anthropological perspectives* (pp 185-204). London: Routledge.
- Das, N. K. (2006). Cultural diversity, religious syncretism and people of India: An anthropological interpretation. *Bangladesh E-Journal of Sociology*, 3(2). Retrieved from <http://www.bangladeshsociology.org/BEJS%203.2%20Das.pdf>
- Descola, P. (1992). Societies of nature and the nature of society. In A. Kuper (Ed.), *Conceptualizing society*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Descola, P., Pálsson, G. (1996). Introduction. In P. Descola, & G. Pálsson (Eds.), *Nature and society: Anthropological perspectives* (pp. 1-22). London: Routledge.
- Geisler, C. (2010). Must biodiversity hot-spots be social not-spots? Win-win ecology as sustainable social policy. *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*, 4(1), 119-133.
- Lévi- Strauss, C. (1963). *Totemism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1976). *Structural anthropology* ( Vol. 2). New York: Basic Books.
- Oelschlaeger, M. (1991). *The idea of wilderness: From prehistory to the age of ecology*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Parajuli, P. (2001). Learning from ecological ethnicities: Towards a plural political ecology of knowledge. In J. Grim (Ed.), *Indigenous traditions and ecology - The interbeing of cosmology and community* (pp. 559-590). Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Rosenzweig, M. L. (2003). *Win-win ecology: How the Earth's species can survive in the midst of human enterprise*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Roy Burman, B. K. (1992). Homage to Earth. In G. Sen (Ed.), *Indigenous vision: People of India, attitudes to environment*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.
- Rustomji, N. K. (1988). *Verrier Elwin and India's North-eastern Borderlands*. Shillong: North- Eastern Hill University Publications.
- Saraswati, B. N. (2001). Nature as culture: The vision of a tradition. In N. Mathur (Ed.), *Santal worldview* (pp. 1-7). New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Sinha, S. C. (1957). Tribal cultures of Peninsular India. *Man in India*, 37, 46.
- Srivastava, V. K. (2010). *Socio economic characteristics of tribal communities that call themselves Hindu* (Working Paper Series, Vol. 1(3)). Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, and Religions and Development Research Programme.
- Western, D., & Wright, R. M. (1994). The background to community-based conservation. In D. Western, & R. M. Wright (Eds.), *Natural connections: Perspectives in community-based conservation* (pp. 1-12). Washington D.C.: Island Press.
- WWF- India (2004). *Kaziranga- Karbi Anglong landscape annual report*.