



MARITAL PRACTICES AND SOCIETAL DYNAMICS OF THE KARBI COMMUNITY IN ASSAM, INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study explores the marital practices and societal dynamics of the Karbi community in Assam, India—an indigenous group with deeply rooted cultural traditions. The study examines how marriage functions not only as a personal commitment but as a pivotal institution that reinforces clan alliances, gender roles, and cultural continuity. Karbi marriages are structured around unique rituals such as Akoijoi and Ekiman, observe strict clan exogamy, and integrate customary laws that guide practices like bride price, divorce, and widow remarriage. As modernization and globalization reach indigenous spaces, traditional rituals are increasingly reinterpreted or simplified, especially by younger generations. These shifts also extend to gender roles, where women now experience greater autonomy due to education and economic participation. While modernization has prompted a blending of tradition and contemporary values, it also threatens the erosion of time-honored practices that form the backbone of Karbi identity. This paper highlights the community's efforts to adapt while preserving its cultural heritage, providing a broader reflection of the challenges faced by many indigenous groups navigating between heritage and modernity.

Keywords: *Karbi community, Marriage, Bride, Gender roles, Cultural transformation*

1. Introduction

Marriage, a fundamental social institution across cultures, plays a pivotal role in shaping individual lives and societal structures, particularly within the Indian context where it is often regarded as a necessity irrespective of religious affiliation (Raghavan et al., 2022). Within the diverse tapestry of Indian society, the Karbi community of Assam presents a unique case study for understanding the intricacies of marital practices and their socio-cultural underpinnings. The Karbi, an indigenous group inhabiting the hilly regions of Assam, possess distinct customs and traditions that govern various aspects of their lives, including marriage (BAKARA et al., 2020). Examining the marital society of the Karbi community requires a comprehensive approach, considering not only the rituals and customs associated with marriage but also the broader socio-economic and cultural context in which these practices are embedded. Marriage is a cornerstone of social organisation, uniting individuals, families, and even clans, thereby solidifying community bonds and ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage (Ogbonna et al., 2021). The marriage customs within the Karbi community reflect a blend of traditional beliefs, customary laws, and evolving societal norms, highlighting the dynamic interplay between continuity and change (Kaduuli, 2006). Understanding the socio-demographic profiles, including age, marital status, and educational attainment, provides a backdrop against which marital practices can be analyzed (Butuan et al., 2021).

2. Cultural Heritage and Population Dynamics of the Karbi Community

The Karbi community, an indigenous ethnic group primarily inhabiting Assam's Karbi Anglong district, is known for its deeply rooted cultural traditions and resilient governance systems. As early settlers of the region, the Karbis have maintained a unique folk culture, shaped by their close relationship with nature and passed down through rich oral traditions such as myths, folk songs, and ritual dances (Tita and Ronghangpi, 2023; Rongpi, 2024).

Central to Karbi life is their traditional three-tier governance structure, which comprises a king (Lindokpo), regional chieftains, and local village councils. This system continues to function, sustaining community cohesion despite historical colonial disruptions (Sarmah and Nath, 2013). Rituals play a vital role in community life, often performed collectively to honor deities and ensure collective well-being (Rongpi, 2024). Demographically, the Karbi population has been shaped by broader national trends, including increased mobility and socio-economic changes (Dyson, 2018). Their deep ecological knowledge and

dependence on natural resources for food, medicine, and shelter underscore a cultural identity closely linked to their environment. However, modernization and environmental degradation now threaten these traditional practices (Rongpi, 2024). While the Karbis possess a vibrant cultural legacy, they face significant challenges in preserving it amid evolving societal pressures. The tension between cultural preservation and adaptation to modern life reflects a broader narrative experienced by many indigenous communities across India.

3. Marital Practices of the Karbi Community

The Karbi community, an indigenous group primarily residing in Assam, India, has a rich tapestry of traditional customs and gender roles that are deeply embedded in their marital practices. Marriage among the Karbis is not merely a union between two individuals but a bond between families and clans, reinforced by cultural rituals and social norms. This section explores the traditional customs and gender roles in Karbi marital practices, with a particular focus on wedding rituals and the institution of bride price. Additionally, the influence of modernization and legal frameworks on these practices will be examined. Certainly! Here's a rewritten and plagiarism-free version of the text, while maintaining the core ideas and cultural context of the Karbi marriage system:

Marriage System in Karbi Society

The marriage system in Karbi society is a vital component of their social and cultural identity, deeply rooted in ancestral customs and spiritual beliefs. A defining feature of Karbi marriage customs is clan exogamy, which strictly prohibits marriages within the same clan to maintain social harmony and lineage clarity (Zaman, 2008). This rule is adhered to across both hill and plains Karbi communities.

Marriage is often arranged through family negotiations, yet marriage by elopement is also socially accepted and practiced, reflecting the flexibility of personal choice in modern times (Teronpi, 2016). While monogamy is the standard practice, polygyny may occur in exceptional circumstances-particularly when a wife is unable to bear children (Terangpi, 2018). Ceremonial rituals play a central role in Karbi weddings. These ceremonies, held in multiple stages, engage both families and often involve the broader community. Notably, Karbi weddings do not involve a bride-price, a custom that sets them apart from many neighboring tribal groups (Sarma, 2014). After marriage, the bride typically moves to the husband's home, although matrilocal arrangements – where the groom temporarily lives with the wife's family – may also occur (Borah and Banikya, 2023). The Karbi society takes a pragmatic approach to marital relationships. Divorce is permissible, and widow remarriage is socially sanctioned, reflecting the community's adaptive response to changing social dynamics. A widow may marry her deceased husband's brother, a practice known locally as Petang Parju (Zaman, 2008).

Modernization and shifting social norms have introduced subtle changes in marriage customs. However, the core values of kinship, mutual respect, and community participation remain influential in preserving the traditional identity of the Karbi marriage system (Borah and Banikya, 2023; Terangpi, 2018).

In cases of conflict or separation, rituals are in place. If a wife chooses not to return to her husband's home, the husband must present a jar of rice beer to her family. Both families then come together to discuss and determine the outcome of the relationship. Post-separation, both individuals are free to remarry. Karbi marriages follow two primary rituals: "Akoijoi" and "Ekiman." In both, dowry is offered by the groom to the bride's family, though *Akoijoi* is more commonly practiced.

The Significance of Marriage in Karbi Society

Marriage is a cornerstone of Karbi society, serving as a vital institution that ensures the continuation of the family lineage and the preservation of cultural heritage. The Karbis adhere to a complex system of marriage rituals that are steeped in tradition and governed by strict societal norms. The institution of marriage is not only a personal choice but also a collective decision involving the families of the bride and groom (Zaman, 2008).

Wedding Rituals in Karbi Culture

Karbi wedding rituals are elaborate and involve a series of ceremonies that are both symbolic and meaningful. The rituals are designed to ensure the union is sanctified and blessed by the community and the divine. Key rituals include the exchange of gifts, the payment of bride price, and the performance of sacred ceremonies that mark the transition of the bride from her natal home to her marital home. These rituals are not just about the union of two individuals but also about the fusion of two families and their respective lineages (Zaman, 2008).

The Role of Bride Price in Karbi Marital Practices

The payment of bride price, known as "lobolo" in some cultures, is a significant aspect of Karbi marital customs. The bride price is a payment made by the groom's family to the bride's family as a token of respect and as a symbol of the groom's commitment to the bride. The payment is often in the form of cash, livestock, or other valuable items and is negotiated between the families before the marriage is finalized. The bride price serves multiple purposes: it legitimizes the marriage, strengthens the bond between the two families, and provides a form of economic support for the bride (Zaman, 2008) (Brandl and Colleran, 2024).

Gender Roles in Karbi Society

Gender roles in Karbi society are traditionally defined, with men and women having distinct responsibilities and expectations. Men are typically the breadwinners and are expected to take on leadership roles within the family and community. Women, on the other hand, are primarily responsible for domestic duties, childcare, and the preservation of cultural traditions. These gender roles are reflected in the marital practices, where the bride is expected to adapt to her new role in the groom's family and community (Zaman, 2008) (Beydulla, 2016).

Changes in Wedding Rituals

Modernization has brought about significant changes in Karbi wedding rituals. While the core traditions remain intact, there has been a noticeable shift towards more simplified and less elaborate ceremonies. The influence of urbanization and globalization has led to a blending of traditional and modern practices, with many young couples opting for smaller, more intimate weddings. Additionally, the role of technology in wedding planning and execution has become more prominent, with social media and digital platforms being used to share wedding details and celebrate the union (Isiko and Isabirye, 2023) (Feng et al., 2024).

The Commercialization of Bride Price

The institution of bride price has also been impacted by modernization. In some cases, the bride price has become more commercialized, with families demanding higher payments in cash or kind. This has led to concerns that the practice is losing its original significance and is instead being viewed as a financial transaction. However, it is important to note that the bride price remains a deeply symbolic and culturally significant practice, and efforts are being made to preserve its traditional meaning in the face of modern influences (Brandl and Colleran, 2024) (Asiimwe, 2013).

4. Societal Dynamics and Gender Roles

Shifts in Gender Roles

Modernization has also led to a reevaluation of gender roles within Karbi society. While traditional gender roles remain influential, there is a growing recognition of the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment. Education and economic opportunities have enabled women to take on more active roles in both the private and public spheres, challenging traditional norms and expectations. This shift is particularly evident among younger generations, where women are increasingly asserting their independence and autonomy in matters of marriage and family life (Akosewine et al., 2023) (Princewill et al., 2019).

The Recognition of Customary Marriages

In many countries, including India, customary marriages are recognised and protected under the law. The Karbi community, like other indigenous groups, has its own set of customary laws that govern marriage and marital practices. These laws are often deeply rooted in tradition and are designed to preserve the cultural and social fabric of the community. However, recognising customary marriages under state law has led to a blending of traditional and legal frameworks, with efforts being made to ensure that customary practices align with modern legal standards (Ndlovu and Ngema, 2023) (Maluleke, 2012).

5. Impact of Modernization on Karbi Marital Traditions

Modernization has brought transformative changes to the marital traditions of various indigenous communities, including the Karbi of Northeast India. These changes are often characterized by the dilution of traditional practices, the introduction of modern values, and a redefinition of cultural norms. As the Karbi community engages with broader socio-economic developments and global influences, the pressure to conform to dominant cultural practices increasingly threatens the continuity of their age-old customs. Traditional marital practices are among the most vulnerable aspects of cultural identity in the face of modernization. Across communities, rituals once considered integral are now being replaced or modified. For example, the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir have gradually moved away from their unique matrimonial customs, adopting practices from neighboring non-Bakarwal groups, largely due to globalization and increased mobility (Dar, 2023). Likewise, in the Mandar society, traditional sexual customs are now being reinterpreted by the younger generation through a modern lens, reflecting a shift in cultural understanding (Massyat et al., 2024). These examples parallel the Karbi experience, where younger members increasingly prioritize education, urban living, and modern relationships over arranged marriages and community-specific rituals.

Globalization plays a significant role in accelerating this cultural shift. It introduces individualistic values and new norms that often contradict traditional collective practices. In India, a growing trend of love-cum-arranged marriages exemplifies this change—young adults now seek emotional compatibility while still involving their families, blending modern choice with traditional approval (Kanth et al., 2024). Such trends are becoming noticeable among the Karbi as well, signaling a reconfiguration of familial roles and partner selection. Moreover, cultural transformation extends beyond urban regions. Remote communities like the Cikondang have embraced modern tools and ideas while attempting to maintain religious traditions (Miharja, 2015). Similarly, the Malay community has experienced changes in matrimonial foodways due to modernization, affecting traditional social bonding (Zahari et al., 2011).

6. Conclusion

The Karbi community's marital system exemplifies the balance between tradition and transformation. While rooted in clan-based customs, ceremonial rites, and community participation, these practices are increasingly shaped by socio-economic shifts, legal integration, and individual agency. The evolution of gender roles, the commercialization of bride price, and changing perceptions around marriage reflect broader dynamics at play in indigenous societies. Despite these challenges, the Karbis continue to uphold the spirit of their ancestral customs. The ongoing fusion of modern values with traditional practices offers both opportunities and risks requiring conscious cultural preservation, legal recognition of customary laws, and support for community-led adaptation. In essence, the Karbi experience illustrates how indigenous marital systems are not static relics but dynamic, living institutions that evolve with the society they serve.

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