

An Anthropological Study of the Karbi Religious Festival/Rituals – Rongker

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Abstract: The Karbis celebrate different festivals/rituals throughout the year and some of them performed for the well being of the family and community, for protection, for success, for preventing and curing diseases, some are for crops protection and good production etc. Rongker is religious festivals/rituals of the Karbis which is observed annually, every fourth, fifth or ten years or when it is needed. The main purpose of Rongker festivals/ritual is to appease the territorial deities for the protection of the village or regions from any kind of natural calamities, diseases, to ensure the well-being of the people and to have a good farming season during the period. The present paper is an attempt to study the types of Rongker as celebrated by the Karbis of Karbi Anglong, Assam (India). It also tries to discuss the origin or the beginning of the celebration and significance of Rongker festivals. For the present study data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include case-study and participant observation.

Keywords: Karbi, Rongker, Festivals, Rituals, Origins, Deity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Melford Spiro defined religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Spiro, 1973, p.96 cited in Bowie, 2006)

Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace outlined faith as “a set of rituals, rationalized by story, that mobilizes supernatural powers for the aim of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature” (Haviland, 1990).

Ritual refers narrowly to prescribed, formal acts that take place in the context of religious worship. Anthropologists use “ritual” to denote any activity with a high degree of formality and a non-utilitarian. This usage includes not only clearly religious activities, but also such as events as festivals, parades, initiations, games, and greetings. In its broadest sense, ritual may refer not to any particular kind of event but to the expressive aspect of all human activity. To the extent that it conveys messages about the social and cultural status of individuals, any human actions has a ritual dimension (Barfield, 1997:410).

The Karbis are one of the major ethnic communities of northeast celebrate and mostly inhabited in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The Karbis observe Rongker - a religious festivals/rituals used to observed annually, every fourth, fifth or ten years or when it is needed.

II. OBJECTIVE

The present paper is an attempt to study the different types of Rongker as celebrated by the Karbis. It also tries to discuss the origin or the beginning of the celebration of Rongker festivals.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the present study data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include case-study and participant observation.

Data were collected during the ritual performances of “Rongker” at Ram Teron Village, under Lumbajong and at Dilawjan under Bokajan Development Block of Karbi Anglong district of Assam (India) during February to June, 2014. Case-study methods were used for collecting the necessary information, along with observational methods. Case-study was taken from the priest associated with ritual of “Rongker”.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. About Rongker

From the present finding it came to know that “Rongker” is religious festivals/rituals of the Karbis which is observed annually, every fourth, fifth or ten years or when it is needed. The main purpose of Rongker festivals/ritual is to appease the territorial deities for the protection of the village or regions from any kind of natural calamities, diseases, to ensure the well-being of the people and to have a good farming season during the period. There are different types of Rongker and these are “Havar Rongker” or “Than Rongker”, “Pirda Rongker”, “Wophong” Rongker”, “Dengja Rongker”, “Tongrop-Tongso Rongker”, and “Ajo Rongker”. In all this, “Rongker” propitiation to “Hemphu”, Mukrang” and “rasinja is common since they are believed to be the greatest gods/ deities of the Karbis. The propitiation to other deities varied from village to village, and from region to region, as well as varied among the type of “Rongker”, since the deities invoked are from nearby rivers, forests, streams, hills etc.

As told by Mr.Sar-ik Teron of Ram Teron village and according to Mr Lunse Timung(taken from souvenir of Lokimo Rongker: Pho Angdeng Vophong Rongker Karkli) , the first worship or the origin of Rongker, dates back during the time of Rukasen (A Karbi Legendary). As per the story told by them, thusand of years ago since no one had build a village in the traditional way before, so Rukasen along with other people decide to build a village in the traditional way performing all the rites and rituals to have the blessing of God. Then accordingly all the people go and marked the area placed in forest where the village would be build. After the area had been marked the people cleared the forest(marked area). And after that the people constructed their houses and build a village. For the well being of the village the villagers decide to appease God Hemphu, God Mukrang and Goddess Rasinja. And they also decides to appease the deities of the forest, river and land of that area and accordingly they performed all the rites and rituals for the well being of the village and to received the blessing of the Gods and Deities. Thus the tradition of performing the Rongker Festival among the Karbi originated.

B. Types of Rongker

There are different types of Rongker festivals/rituals as celebrated by the Karbis as found in the present study which are as-

Havar Rongker

Havar Rongker or Rongker is a religious festival of the Karbis which is observed annually in the village on a community basis. There is no fixed time and date for the observance of this festival. *Rongker* is mostly performed in the beginning of the year i.e. in the month of January or February or it can be said at the beginning of the *Jhum* cultivation. The main purpose of *Rongker* was to appease the territorial deity for welfare of the village and to ward of diseases and other natural calamities and for the good cultivation ahead.

The festival was done by the consensus of the people of the village as a whole. All the requirements of the rituals are meet up together by the people of the village. For performing this festival first the people of the village meet at the *Sarthe* (village Headman) house and will discussed about how to make it the festival successful. Here in the discussion the time and date for the festival will be fixed. The amount of money, numbers of animals to be sacrificed, and the other requirement will be discussed. Accordingly how much amount of money and others contribution the each family of the village will be fixed. The work distribution among the people will be discussed on the meets. Work such as collection of money and materials requirement such as bamboo, woods, etc. would be collected by the male members and the female will basically entrusted in making *horlang* (rice beer) and *hor arak* (wine). The fixed place of performing the ritual will be there in the village known as *Rongker Anglong*. The place is usually a nearby jungle of the *Sarthe* house. The place is believed to be sacred and it is use for no other purpose. The cleaning of the place and the preparation of the Alters will be done by the male folks. When everything is ready then the festival is performed.

The festival began with the rituals performed the previous night of the day of the festival where the elderly folks of the village will meet and performed the ritual known as *Seh Kasadi*. *Seh Kasadi* is the ritual performed to invite the deities to attend the festival on the following day. The ritual is performed by the *Kurusr* (Priest). He invites the deities by pouring out *Horlang* in a leaf and offer to the deities with enchanting hymns.

The next day the festival will again begin with the *Kasadi* at the Sarthe house. After that the male folk will leave home for the place of performing the rituals and the women folk stayed behind to cook rice for the feast to be followed after the ritual. On reaching the place of performing the ritual, the worship of the deities is again started by the *Kasadi* to invoking the deities. After that the deities is worshipped one by one accordingly. The deities worship during the *Rongker* is varied from village to village as well as region to region. However the ancestor spirit like *Hemphu*, *Rasinja* and *Mukrang* and deities like *Longle A Hi-e* are worshipped in common.

In the festival the deities are worshipped for the protection of the village from the natural calamities, diseases, and the well being of the village people. It is done for maintaining peace and harmony with other people and gods and deities. In the festival the permission of collecting goods and required for the livelihood being of the people is sought from the deities of the forest, and the female god *Longle A HI-E* was worshipped for the protection of the crops in the field and to add manure to the soil of the cultivating land. The people have a deep faith that it was very necessary to appease the deities to have a good cultivation and to maintain peace and harmony among the people.

Vophong Rongker

Vophong Rongker was the religious festival of the Karbi that was performed in the mouza level after every three years which last for three days. On the first day the ritual of *Vophong Rongker* was performed, in the second day the rituals *Menu Kiri* and *Huni Kiti* was performed and on the third day the distribution of the *Menu* was done known as *Menu Chibak*. There would be a committee for the success celebration of this festival. The committee would comprise of the village headman of the villages of the mouzas headed by the Mouzadar. All the villagers of the mouza collectively bear the cost of the festival. The village headman would collect the money and other decided materials and things decided by the committee from the village and give it to the committee. The festival was performed in the village of the village of "*Dengja*". People of all the villages come together in the village of the *Dengja* and celebrate the festival. When all the things are ready the festival is celebrated.

The festival begins with the "*Kasadi*" i.e. inviting the deities to attend the rituals. *Kasadi* was performed on the previous night of the rituals was to be performed. Here the priest would pour offer wine to the deities and invites them to attend the rituals following the next day. The next day before performing the rituals of worshipping the deities *Kasadi* would be performed on the Alters of the deities. After that the respective village priest would performed the ritual. The first deity worshipped is '*Hemphu*'. Pig, goats, and fowls are sacrificed in the rituals offering the respective animals to the respective deities. In these rituals the deities are worshipped for protection of the people of the area from plague, diseases, natural calamities, war. It was performed to maintain peace and harmony among the people of the area and also for maintaining peace with the deities.

On the second day of the festival the rituals *Menu Kiri* and *Huni Kiti* are performed. The two rituals would be performed at two different places. The distribution of the people would be done accordingly for the rituals. Once the people have been distributed for the rituals they are not allowed to go to the place where the other ritual is performing. The rituals *Kasadi* is done again on the first night of the festival to invites the deities to attend the rituals to be followed on the second day. On the second day two groups of people would go for performing the rituals at two different places. The rituals *Menu Kiri* is performed resembling the Karbi mythological believe of the origin of paddy in the Karbi society. The ritual shows that how the goddess of paddy and cotton and others have been brought back to the Karbi society after she has left the society and went away to placed called *Lang Kuleng Arlok*. The ritual is done to appease the deities of *Lang Kuleng Arlok* and to bring back the goddess of Paddy and others in the Karbi society and to get her blessing. And the ritual *Huni Kiti* was done ward off the evil effect from the society to have peace and harmony in the society. In this ritual *Hemphu* and the deities known as *Huni Recho* and his associates was worshipped.

On the third day of the festival the seeds of paddy and cotton are distributed to all the people of the villages. Here the seeds of paddy and cotton are distributed in equal amount among the people. The seeds are believed to have the blessing of the Goddess.

Dengja Rongker

Dengja Rongker also known as *Dovanso Rongker* is another types of Rongker. It was performed to get rid of man eating Tiger of the Longri(area). The ritual was performed by *Dengja* the high priest. The Rongker was performed once in 5 or 10 years. The ritual was performed at the Mouza level and was done by the contribution of all the people of that mouza or Longri.

Tongrop Tongso Rongker

Tongrop Tongso Rongker was performed during emergency to get rid of natural calamities, ethnic clash, epidemic diseases. There was no fixed time to perform the ritual. The ritual was performed when it was needed. *Tongrop Tongso* means suddenly or immediately. The ritual was performed at Mouza level and its done by the contribution of all the people of the mouza.

Ajo Rongker

Ajo Rongker was performed during night. The ritual was performed at the village level. It was performed by the consensus and contribution of all the people of the village. The ritual was performed to protect the village from epidemic diseases such as cholera, small pox etc.

C. The Significance of Rongker

Rongker is a very important religious festival/rituals of the Karbis. Rongker is deeply connected by the social, economical and as well as political and religious aspect of the people. The people perform these rituals(Rongker) on village level and mouza level for the welfare of the people. The people believes that by performing the Rongker festival/rituals the whole people of the village or mouza will be protected from any unwanted diseases and natural calamities. The people also performed the festival/ritual for the good cultivation. They believed that the crops and other vegetables grown in the jhum field are protected from the pest and wild animals and also gives a better production of the cultivations. Rongkers are also perform to maintain social harmony between the people of the village and also between people from other villages. The most important aspect of performing the Rongker is to appease the deities. The people believes that by appeasing the deities the people will have a happy and peaceful lives. They will have good health, good food and a good and happy place to live in.

V. CONCLUSION

The religious practices plays an important role in the cultural aspects of the people. Rongker is the religious festival of the Karbi people. It holds a significant importance among the Karbis. The Karbis have a special connection with the nature. Rongker is an example of it. The Rongker used to perform to appease the territorial deities, deities of forest, river, hills and mountain. The rituals was performed together by all the people of the village. Together they bear the expenses and needs of the rituals. The rituals was performed for the good production of cultivation, community harmony and peace, good health of the people.

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