

Influence of the Evil Figure, *Tisso Jonding* on the Socio-religio-cultural Life of Karbis

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Abstract: *Tisso Jonding* is one of the most feared evil figures among Karbis. Karbi traditional drummers called *Dohuidi* consider *Tisso* as their *kuru* (teacher) and always offer *hor* (rice beer) and seek their blessings before they take part in any ritual. In the past, *Tisso* even came down the hills and helped Karbis during their socio-religio-cultural occasions such as *Chojun*, *Chomkan* and other important occasions. However, all *Tisso* return to their habitat (i.e., forests) at dawn and this specific period is popularly referred as *Tisso Rongdam* (*rong*: village; *dam*: to return). The tradition of guarding dead bodies among Karbis is inherited from *Tisso*, who in the past were reported to feed on the corpse. Origin of *Tisso* subclan of Karbis is inherently associated with *Tisso*. *Hanso ke-et* (*Zingiber casumunar* Roxb.; Zingiberaceae) is taboo to *Tisso* and touching the plant is reported to make them unholy forever, lose divinity and become excommunicated from the grand *Tisso* family.

Key words: Karbi tribe, *Tisso Jonding*, *Chomkan*, *Tisso Rongdam*, tradition, *hanso ke-et*

Introduction

Karbis represents one of the major tribes of North-East India and possess rich traditions and culture unique from other tribes of the region. The historical account of Karbis is largely fragmented due to lack of written records. However, ethnically they are Mongoloid and speak a local dialect belonging to Tibeto-Burmese particularly the Kuki-Chin

sub-group of languages. Further, they are believed to have migrated from the Kuki-Chin area, in and around the Chindwin river valley in Western Myanmar (Lyll 1908:1; Bhattacharjee 1986:19; Bordoloi, Thakur & Saikia 1982:52; Kathar 1997:32; Phangcho 2001:32). A popular folklore relating to the origin of paddy also suggests Karbis had settled in the Kuki-Chin region and even befriended a Chin man referred as *Hukhi Chindaipo* (*Hukhi*: friend; *Chindaipo*: a Chin man). Narration of this legend during the consumption of *An Kimi* (new rice of the season) is still vibrant. Smaller or larger Karbi settlements exist in the entire North-Eastern region and even in Bangladesh; at present high concentration can be found in the two hill districts of Assam, viz., Karbi Anlong and North Cachar Hills. Forests have been their natural habitat and their main mode of agriculture is still the age old *jhum* (shifting cultivation), at least in the hills. Rice is the staple food and locally prepared rice beer is a common drink of the people.

Karbis practice traditional animistic religion which is considered as some form of Hinduism, but they do not have idols, temples or shrines (Lyll 1908:30; Bhattacharjee 1986:133). After death the body is cremated but the Kabris believe in rebirth and the immortality of the *karjong* (soul). *Karjongs* of deceased settle in the *Chom Arong* (the abode of king *Yama*, the god of Death) in heaven (Lyll 1908:28; Bordolio 1982:2). Probably, forest environment played a prominent role in the origin and evolution of their religion. According to Karbi mythology each and every creature on this earth is created by the god *Hemphu* (the Creator). Further, objects with fearsome or peculiar appearance are believed to possess divinity. Having accepted this philosophy, Karbis believe in multiple Gods including rivers, mountains, waterfall, rock, sacred groves, etc. These gods are propitiated by sacrificing fowls and pigs or goats annually or after every few years for various purposes - to grant prosperity and avert misfortunes, for rich harvest, etc., (Lyll 1908:32; Bhattacharjee 1986:134).

The concept of good and evil is highly vibrant in Karbi society and is based on the religious practices of the people. Common belief is *good* refers to God (*Arnam*) and *evil* refers to devil or demon (*Hi-i*; pronounced as *he-e*) and considers *both* entities as possessing divinity and unseen power and enjoying equal status. While *arnam* are sympathetic and helpful to Karbis and human in general, *hi-i* inflict harm or bring sorrow without any provocations. *Hi-i* literally means devil or demon or any destructive entities/forces that cause harm to mankind. The underlying difference however, is that *arnam* are assigned with specific duties towards Karbis, and *their* propitiations are meant for strengthening the bond of association. While *hi-i* has no such obligations and their propitiation is temporary, that is, only to appease *hi-i* not to harm Karbis. In many families however, *hi-i* are propitiated as *hem angtar* (Household god). As for

instance, the god *Peng* (the Protector) who is actually a *Chek kama*, a *hi-i*, is propitiated by sacrificing fowls and one white male goat. The concept of good and evil is also extended to persons or objects that possess divinity or unnatural power. Many plants and animals are considered as symbols of *hi-i*, which is of course based on legends. *Cheri* (*Ficus* spp.; Moraceae), *thengmu* (*Alstonia scholaris* R.Br; Apocynaceae) among plants, and *Vo-ak* (crow), *takun* (vultures) among animals are considered as symbols of *hi-i*, and so, are often avoided. There are many popular Karbi folklores based on *arnam* and *hi-i* that are still narrated to children as bedtime stories. One popular story often narrated to the author during his childhood is a *hi-ipi* (lady *hi-i*) devouring children who were enjoying *inglet* (mulberry fruits).

Methodology

Field study was undertaken among Karbis in Karbi Anglong district, Assam. Elders and learned persons, both men and women were consulted and their narrations on the concept of good and evil were recorded. Persons who had reportedly encountered evil spirits were consulted to record their experience and views of *kurusar* (priests) regarding good and evil was also recorded. *Thekere* (persons who practice witchcraft) were also requested to narrate their concept of good and evil. Information as collected above was confirmed with elders and learned persons of various localities to avoid ambiguity. The present paper is based on actual field study undertaken by the author.

Results

Karbis believe in many evil figures/images locally called *hi-i*. Among the most common figures/images are *Chek kama*, *Panichok* or *Khetor* (fish eating *hi-i*), *Tisso Jonding* or *Tisso* and *bab*, to name a few. *Chekama* is described as carrying a *chin* (stuff), his identity, and reported to attack human. *Panichok* can often be seen at night in open fields or streams where they fish with their protruding tongue. It appears human and behaves as a friend; hypnotizes the victim and makes them walk through water, dangerous roads, thorny path, etc. These often cause illnesses and sometimes even death due to self inflicted injuries. *Panichok* is believed to carry *Bor* (amulet) which hangs from the arm pit. Possession of such a *bor* is believed to bring wealth. *Bab* is a form of evil worship in which humans are sacrificed for wealth. The victim is poisoned in honor of the evil figure whose identity is still obscure. Khasi also worship serpent called *U Thlen* in the belief that appeasing the snake god with human lives will bring prosperity and wealth to the owners (Gurdon 1907:98).

Tisso Jonding or *Tisso* is one of the most feared evil figures (*hi-i*) among Karbis. Karbi folklore is replete with stories of *Tisso*, and most of these

stories come from western part of Karbi Anglong district. Many stories also mention the encounter of opium-addicted persons with the invisible beast. One popular folklore narrates a *Tisso* attacking and devouring a Karbi man who was returning from his relatives' place with fowls, at night. The evil beast reached the victim's place with his belongings and fell asleep immediately. Feeling uncomfortable, the lady of the house woke up and found blood stains on the hairy body of the beast with its characteristically inserted eyes. She cautiously took her children and belongings outside, closed the door and set the house on fire. The *Tisso* screamed for help, but was devoured by the galloping flames.

Tisso is believed to be polymorphic and highly illusive and never appears before human eyes though its voice can be heard and it can speak fluently in the local language. The beast is often talked of having a well-built body covered with thick brown hair, eyes like dogs and walk on two legs, that gives an overall appearance of an ape (Fig.1).



Fig.1 Karbis' impression of *Tisso Jonding*
(Art by Sri Deben Timung)

Tisso possess characteristic divinity that *the more one looks at its face, the taller it grows, and attains the figure of a giant before devouring its victim*. Deep forests and large banyan groves (*Ficu bengalensis* L.; Moraceae) are the preferred habitats of *Tisso*. The beast often imitates human voice and lures the unsuspecting person deep into the forest, hypnotize and devours the victim. For this reason all the children are cautioned by their parents and elders to not call out the names of their friends and colleagues in the forest. If encountered accidentally, the best option is to 'look at his feet for some time; the *Tisso* gradually becomes shorter and shorter to a tiny creature and finally becomes nonexistent'.

Tisso has a significant influence on the socio-religio-cultural life of Karbis. Many traditional practices among the people have their roots in *Tisso*. Karbis believe *Tissos* to be great musicians. The *hi-i* can produce beautiful notes of many instruments such as drums, stringed-instruments, flute, etc. According to legend, Karbis have inherited the art of music from *Tisso*. Traditional drummers called *Dohuidi* consider *Tisso* as their *kuru* (teacher) and always offer *hor* (rice beer) and seek *their* blessings before they take part in any ritual. Mrs. Kache Kropi, my grandmother, narrated that she heard music played by *Tisso* with notes as "eng eng, eng eng lu, eng eng lu; jangphong parok aduki nangta chojima Jari; lu lu, eng eng lu". She added that *Tisso* can also cry like a baby and large *cheri arong* (banyan tree) are *their* favorite spots. It is reported that 'eng eng lu' is the favourite musical notes of *Tissos*. It is believed that in the olden days, persons with divinity invited *Tisso* by playing these notes on a stringed instrument called *kum* (veena).

Many elders have narrated that in the olden days *Tisso* maintained a good rapport with Karbis and often mingled with them. Of course, their intention was not of friendship, it was to devour them if an opportunity arose. *Tisso* even come down the hills and help Karbis during their socio-religio-cultural occasions such as *Chojun*, *Chomkan* and other important occasions. However, all *Tisso* return to their habitat (i.e., forests) at dawn, and this specific period is popularly referred as *Tisso Rongdam* (*rong*: village; *dam*: to return). *Tissos'* activity is more prominent during *Chomkan*, the most important socio-religio-cultural festival among Karbis, when *they* are reported to even assist the host for the coveted occasion. During the festival which lasts for three days *Jambili Athon*, the traditional woodcrafts of Karbis are exhibited (Fig.2). (Bordoloi 1982:31; Tamuly & Tamuly 1994:14; Tamuly 1994-95:9; Teron 2008:106). Wearing their traditional attire, people from far and wide attend this festival; they make merry, drink beer, and sing and dance and so do *Tisso*.



Fig.2 Exhibition of *Jambili Athon*, traditional woodcraft of Karbis during *Chomkan*

There are instances when under the influence of alcohol, etc., *Tisso* are known to have failed to return home at *Tisso Rongdam*. During *Chomkan*, *Tisso* often sing and dance with Karbi bachelors, particularly on the first night of the festival. Carried away by the joy of singing and dancing and also the effect of rice beer, *Tisso* failed to sense the time of return and stayed back with the Karbis. Some elders reported that often bachelors deliberately hold back *Tisso* in order to see *their* real figure. This plan was reportedly executed by inviting the *Tisso* who is easily identified by local Karbis, to dance with them. Special rice beer was offered during dancing and the dance was deliberately continued till dawn, way past *Tisso Rongdam*. Being drunk and tightly held by bachelors, the *Tisso* could not escape even though he was aware of his *time* of return. In the morning, the beast was found drunk and having regained its original form, the hairy body with the characteristic eyes, was all there for people to see.

Tisso Chomkan or dance of *Tisso* is performed on the first day of *Chomkan* festival. Participants blacken their faces with charcoal to imitate *Tisso* and perform traditional *Chomkan* dance. During the *Chomkan* dance participants hold their waists and move their legs to the rhythm of traditional songs (Fig.3). Result of the whole *Chomkan* is traditionally predicted from the result of the *Tisso Chomkan*.



Fig.3 Traditional *Chomkan* dance of Karbis. Young boys and girls (head covered) in their traditional attires dance to the tune of folk songs. Only bachelors are entitled to participate in the dance.

The legend of *Tisso* has another implication on the religious life of Karbis. After death, the corpse is kept for 1-2 days for relatives to pay homage before it is cremated. Relatives offer liquor, betel nut and betel leaves, biscuits, clothes, etc., and mourn by crying, often leaning on the death body. It was reported that often *Tisso* also come disguised as relatives, lean on the corpse on the pretext of mourning. But the beast being carnivorous, removed flesh from the corpse which created an ugly and embarrassing situation. To prevent such instances, people started guarding the corpse from *Tisso*. Even though the *Tisso* is not a problem now, the tradition of guarding the dead body is still practiced.

The 30th subclan of the *Ejang* (*Ejang* represents one of the five clans of Karbis) referred to as *Tisso* are supposed to have been originally *Tisso*. A popular legend accepted by all Karbis states that during a grand meeting of *Ejang* subclans, some *Tisso* showed interest to become Karbis and promised to abjure all hostile activities and relinquish the divinity of *hi-i*. After prolonged deliberations a new subclan *Tisso* was created, and the interested *Tisso* were accommodated into the subclan, after observing mandatory rituals associated with conversion of non-Karbhis to Karbis.

Hanso ke-et (*Zingiber casumunar* Roxb.; Zingiberaceae) is taboo to *Tisso*. It is reported that touching the plant makes *them* unholy forever, lose divinity and become excommunicated from the grand *Tisso* family. *They* are supposed to be excommunicated on touching urine and fecal matter of other animals including humans. Karbis use these points as weapons to frighten or overcome *Tisso*.

Conclusion

The identity of *Tisso Jonding* is still obscure. A similar mysterious figure called *Mande Burung* (Jungle man) is also prevalent among the Garo tribe and shares the characteristics of Karbis' *Tisso* (Teron 2009:94). The biggest question here is: Is *Tisso Jonding* really an ape or does the creature represent a transitory stage in the long evolutionary history of man? More studies and research needs to be conducted before a conclusion can be made on the true identity of *Tisso* and other mysterious creatures prevalent among Karbis. The specific habitat of *Tisso* also reveals information about the composition of the past vegetation of western Karbi Anglong district. Despite this, the myth of *Tisso* has refused to fade as popular bed time stories among Karbis. But with the fast disappearance of forests and threats to biodiversity, it appears that these mysterious creatures of Karbi folklore will forever remain shrouded in mystery! (Teron 2009:95). In the present era, traditional practices and beliefs have shown signs of degradation, as the so called literate society consider such practices superstitious. Superstitious or scientific, traditional practices and beliefs are undoubtedly expressions of Traditional Knowledge which were gained through long years of observation and trial and error. Further, invasion of science and technology and the so called modern culture have made the once indispensable traditional practices almost redundant. Traditional or cultural practices have been a valuable source of materials for the history of Karbis in particular since they lack written history, and other tribes of North-Eastern region in general.

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