

Article

Ritual of the Dead: Karbi *Chomangkan* Festival in Its Cultural Context

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Abstract: Like most tribal societies, the socio-religious system of the Karbis of Assam also largely conforms to the belief in magic, spirits, and the ancestor cult. The *Chomangkan* is one of the most important rituals of the Karbis and mirrors their philosophy of life and death. The Karbis believe that the *Chomangkan* guides the soul of the dead in its journey to the afterlife, but it is not an immediate funeral ritual, and the relatives of the deceased usually take years to perform it on account of its expensive and elaborate nature. An essential aspect of the ritual is the singing of the oral epics *Kacharhe Alun* and *Mosera Kihir*, which are compositions that recount the migration history of the Karbis as the dead embarks on its journey to the ‘village of the ancestors’. The Karbis, who are a clan-based society, have been influenced by Hinduism and Christianity in the last few decades, which has led to a synthesis of the new faiths with the traditional belief system. Therefore, *Chomangkan* has become a rare ritual, which makes its documentation crucial to preserving Karbi history and culture. Using ethnographic research methods, this paper attempts to critically examine continuity and change in the ‘ritual of the dead’, or *Chomangkan*, practiced among the Karbi community in Assam. It will also provide insights into the ways in which *Chomangkan* as a community festival offers an opportunity for the clans and sub-clans to express solidarity, symbolizing the integration of the Karbi lineages in the face of a changing cultural context through various periods of its history.

Keywords: festival; ritual of the dead; dance; religion; community



Citation: Hansepi, Laxmi, and Rena Laisram. 2022. Ritual of the Dead: Karbi *Chomangkan* Festival in Its Cultural Context. *Religions* 13: 510. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060510>

Academic Editor: Jeffery D. Long

Received: 13 April 2022

Accepted: 31 May 2022

Published: 5 June 2022

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1. Introduction

In tribal societies, death is a tragic event and an occasion in which the community comes together to reaffirm solidarity within families and clans. In the context of the Karbis, one of the largest ethnic groups in Assam, death rituals are performed with the participation of kin, and these rituals sustain the social organization. The Karbis believe that the soul is eternal, and that it resides in a place called *Chom Arong* (resting place of the dead; here, *Arong* means village). When death takes place, the Karbis believe that keeping the body for a longer period can cause evil spirits to lurk around. However, the cause of death must be ascertained to decide on the funeral rituals and so on that are to be followed for the deceased. If the death is due to natural causes, the dead body is kept inside the house for 2–3 days, when families and friends can offer their last respects to the departed soul. In cases where the cause of death is not natural, such as suicide or an accident, the body is not kept inside the house, and a funeral is performed immediately.

The first death ritual is the cremation of the dead (the case for those Karbis who practice animistic beliefs), and the second is the *Chomangkan* (literally, *Chomang* means Khasi, and *kan* means dance), which does not have a fixed time but can be conducted at the convenience of the relatives of the deceased. It may sometimes take a year or more on account of the huge expenditure it requires.

There is a sense of solidarity in partaking in the *Chomangkan*, as the members of the clan consider it their duty to participate and help the family of the deceased because of the prevalence of the concept of *Ajir Kedun*, sometimes referred to as *Ajir Chihung*. *Ajir*

Kedun involves participating in specific tasks for another, hoping that the favor will be returned. The principle of *Ajir Kedun* is closely linked to the communal ownership of land and the need to take care of the society, dividing all assets equally. There is a strong bond exemplified in the Karbi agricultural community as the act of cultivation itself involves sharing the workload and harvests equally by all members of the village. This concept of *Ajir Kedun* also symbolizes the community network. Even today, when private ownership of land is not unknown due to the rise of urbanization and globalization, there is a strong kinship network that binds the members of the society through the '*Ajir Kedun*', and this is especially true in rural areas. In the case of *Chomangkan*, the solidarity of the *Chomfang* (village parties who take part in *Chomangkan*) testifies to the concept of *Ajir Kedun*, which is deep-rooted in Karbi society. Although death is considered a private affair of the family, in the case of *Chomangkan*, it has taken on the shape of a festival. This is due to the presence of a whole community who takes part in the different types of rituals because they deem it their duty, as the larger concept of *Ajir Kedun* prevails.

Despite it being a customary ritual, the observance of this festival in the present times is very rare. The rise of urbanization and modernization has affected these traditional practices over the past few decades. The *Chomangkan* used to be a common customary death ritual in the traditional society when the Karbis mainly practiced animism. The majority of the Karbis are Hindus today, although they continue to worship the traditional spirits and ancestors. The *Chomangkan*, therefore, has become a rare ritual, which makes its documentation crucial to preserving Karbi history and culture.

Using ethnographic research methods, this paper attempts to critically examine continuity and change in the 'ritual of the dead', or *Chomangkan*, practiced among the Karbi community in Assam. It will also provide insights into the ways in which *Chomangkan* as a community festival offers an opportunity for the clans and sub-clans to express solidarity, symbolizing the integration of the Karbi lineages in the face of a changing cultural context through various periods of its history.

2. The Karbi Community

The Karbi tribe is one of the major ethnic communities predominantly settled in the Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. However, they also inhabit other districts, such as Nagaon, Sonitpur, Dima Hasao, and Golaghat, of Assam, as well as other states, such as Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland in northeast India. The Karbi language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, and the Karbi are sometimes referred to as the earliest inhabitants of Assam. Known as the Mikirs to colonial ethnographers, the people call themselves 'Arleng' (which has a dual meaning; it means both 'man' and a 'hill'), which suggests that they must have been inhabitants of hilly regions. However, the term Karbi has become popularly used to refer to them in contemporary times (Dhanaraju and Hansepi 2020).

The Karbis do not have a script of their own and therefore lack a written history. Much of the understanding of their migration history is reconstructed from the recollection and interpretation of oral traditions such as *Mosera Kihir*, an oral epic that recounts the journey of the dead during the *Chomangkan* ritual. As the Karbis practiced *jhum* cultivation or shifting cultivation¹, the community had to move from place to place, which brought them in contact with other ethnic groups. The oral narratives concerning the migration journey state that the Karbis used to live on the banks of the rivers Kalang and Kopili, where Kaziranga National Park is situated. The Karbis claim that Kaziranga is a corrupted version of Kazir Ronghangpi, a Karbi legendary figure known for her immense love for wildlife. Her statue has been installed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (an apex governing body of twin districts inhabited by Karbis in Assam) in Kaziranga to commemorate her.

The migration history of the Karbis, as suggested by local scholar Dhoromsing Teron (2008), mentions that the Karbis were driven to the hills during the reign of the Kachari king, and a portion of them entered the Jaintia Kingdom. Some of them moved to the

Rongkhang region and established their capital at Socheng, called *Ronghang Rongbong*. Since *Ronghang Rongbong* was the traditional capital of the Karbis, the seat of the Karbi king (*Karbi Recho* or *Lindokpo*) is also situated there, along with his council of ministers, known as *Habe-Pinpo*. The council is called *Dorbar*, a term similar to that used by the Khasis². The Karbis who migrated to the Jaintia Kingdom faced harassment and torture at the hands of the Jaintias, and this is said to have compelled them to migrate to the Ahom Kingdom. An important source of information is the *Deodhai Assam Buranji* (Bhuyan 1962), which mentions that the Karbis migrated from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills to their present abode. The chronicle records that the first contact of the Karbis with the Ahoms took place during the reign of King Jayadhwaj Singha (1648–1663). By the 1800s, the Karbis were well settled in the Ahom Kingdom and had to face the subsequent torture of the Burmese when they came to invade Assam between 1817 and 1826. To save themselves from the lecherous eyes of the Burmese army, the women tattooed themselves with an ink called *duk* vertically from the forehead to the chin, as they thought that by doing so, they would appear ugly. Oral sources such as ballads and songs recount the ordeal of the Karbis in the *Man-Aron* (literally, Burmese war) as they witnessed Karbis being murdered, and women raped. Later, this became the tradition of *duk*, in which Karbi women tattoo their faces. Today, the practice of applying *duk* is no longer observed.

Traditionally, in terms of the settlement of the ethnic group, the Karbis are associated with three territorial places (or *Rongbongs*), which include *Chingthong*, *Ronghang*, and *Amri*. The present Karbi Anglong district was earlier known as Mikir Hills and was created in 1951. In the year 1976, it was renamed the Karbi Anglong district. In 2015, West Karbi Anglong district was also created, although KAAC (Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council) retains control over it. The two districts fall under the sixth schedule areas of the Indian Constitution, which has included the Karbis under the Scheduled Tribes list.

The Karbis are a clan-based community, and as such, every individual is part of the large Karbi family. The clans are called *Kur*, and they include Engti or Lijang, Terang or Hangjang, Timung or Tungjang, Enghee or Ejang, and Teron or Kronjang. The *Kurs* are further divided into sub-clans called *Kurso* (*kurso*: small). The Tungjang and Ejang have thirty sub-clans each, the Hangjang has fifteen, the Lijang has six, and the Teron has nine.³ These sub-clans are used as surnames, and all the people of the same clan, but of different sub-clans, are considered siblings. Marriage between individuals of the same clan is not allowed, as the community observes strict rules of exogamy. Violating this norm can lead to excommunication in society, a practice still relevant in contemporary society. The clan names are also the surnames of individuals, and children take their father's surnames. However, it is significant that women retain their father's surname even after marriage; it is said that conversion to their husbands' surnames connotes an incestuous relationship. Interestingly, in the Karbi society, a couple whose mothers belong to the same clan are also considered siblings, and marriage is not allowed in these circumstances.

As per the *Census of India, 2011*, about 80% of the Karbis today practice Hinduism, and there is a small percentage of Christians. The Karbis have a traditional belief system based on clan and ancestor worship called *Honghari*. However, as animism is not recognized as an official religion in the census records in India, the majority of the community has been listed as followers of the Hindu faith. An important point to note is that ever since Karbi Anglong became a district of Assam in 1951, the religious practice of the dominant Assamese community has made inroads into the socio-religious life of the Karbis. It is generally perceived that the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) have been funding revivalist religions such as *Lokhimon*, *Joyguru*, and *Karbi Bhaktitom Trust*, and this has influenced Karbi society, leading to a decline in the practice of *Honghari*.⁴ The pioneering efforts of Christian missionaries who established churches and schools in the interior parts of Karbi Anglong have led to about 20% of the population converting to Christianity. What is of crucial importance is that although the Karbis are identified as Hindus in official records, the evidence of cross-cultural interactions is obvious when the Karbis visit Hindu temples and practice animism simultaneously.

3. Data and Research Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic research methods, including participatory observation and interviews. First-hand participatory observation was made possible by being a part of one ritual in December 2020 and a second held in June 2021. Both were part of a *Kanplapla Chomangkan* festival. It was a four-day event, and the preparation was initiated years before the actual commencement of the festival. The first stage of preparation took place in Tarabasa, located in the Karbi Anglong district. In this case, the host family belonged to the Rongpi sub-clan or Ejang clan; the author stayed with the family for four months before the actual event. The family observed the *Chomangkan* festival for the death of five family members (i.e., paternal grandfather, grandmother, paternal aunt, father, and a sibling) who passed away in 2018, as there may be a *Chomangkan* ritual observed at a particular time of the year for one or many deceased family members.

The author interacted with several youth groups of the village, particularly the dancers and drummers who practiced for several months, as dance is one of the main features of the festival. The study involved 21 dancers and 8 drummers. Apart from observing their everyday lives, interviews were conducted with a cross-section of the Karbi community, namely, village elders, singers, dancers, youth club members, the host family, and so on.

The other study area was in Bey Langso Village, Amri, in West Karbi Anglong district. West Karbi Anglong falls under the purview of the jurisdiction of the erstwhile Karbi king who still commands respect in religious matters. A personal interview was conducted with the 'Karbi king'⁵ to understand his role and responsibilities in earlier times and in the present context. The dirge singers⁶ who resided in Langlokso were also interviewed for the study.

4. Origin of *Chomangkan*

The importance of *Chomangkan* lies in the Karbi's concept of death. The soul is called *akarjong* and is believed to reach a level of sublime divinity once it leaves the dead body. The Karbis called it *Tirim kangduk* (*tirim*: ancestor; *kangduk*: propitiation). In most of the rituals conducted for the family's well-being, the *tirims* are propitiated by offering traditional beverages, cooked meat, rice, and so on. The ancestors are linked to their descendants, who have the responsibility of taking care of the former by worshipping them. In doing so, the ancestors will protect the descendants from all harm that may befall them.

There are some traditional beliefs relating to the origin of *Chomangkan*. One popular notion is that it pertains to Thong Nokbe, a legendary Karbi figure. His original name was Thong Teron, but he was popularly known as Thong Nokbe (*nokbe*: warrior). The story of his might and power is still popular. The Khasi king recruited Thong Nokbe to fight against the Kachari king, and he was able to vanquish the enemy's army almost single-handedly, which impressed the Kachari king. Thus, after a victory in the war, the Khasi king formally adopted Thong Nokbe in a ritual known as *Tej-Putra*. Shortly after that, Thong Nokbe joined the rebellion started by the Karbis who were under the Khasi king's suzerainty and was killed on the occasion (Bey 2007, p. 7). They held a ceremony to mark his death because the king had adopted Thong Nokbe. This took place over three nights and four days, in which dances (*kan*) were performed. This is said to be the origin of *Chomangkan*. Thus, the term *Chomangkan* signifies the dance performed as a part of a ritual after the death of Thong Nokbe, who is partly Chomang by adoption (Pereira et al. 2017).

It is argued that, before using the term *Chomangkan*, the compulsory death ritual was known by the term *Arleng Karhi* (Bordoloi 1982). Here, *Arleng* can be defined as 'man' and can also refer to Karbis. The term '*karhi*' refers to the death ritual. Therefore, *Arleng Karhi* could be literally translated as 'Karbi rituals for the death'. The term *Chomangkan* seems to have replaced *Arleng Karhi* when the Karbis came in contact with the Khasis.

It is important to note that *Chomangkan* has linkages with the history of the Khasis inhabiting the state of Meghalaya. The Karbis are said to have the most strained relationship with the Khasis in the context of their migration history. The strained relationship can be inferred from the negative connotation of the word *Chomang* in Karbi rituals. An example

is a ritual called *Chomang-ase*, which is conducted to ward off any evil from entering the house. Another ritual called *Chomang Chonghu* (*chonghu*: to steal) is performed when a person has illnesses such as diarrhea, fever, or sudden physical injury. Here, even in the case of *Chomangkan*, the Karbis believe that if the family of the deceased does not perform *Chomangkan*, then the soul cannot enter *Chom Arong*. The word *Chomang*, then, has a strong negative connotation, especially related to death, illnesses, and misfortune. Perhaps the Karbis experienced brutality and killings at the hands of the Khasis, which may have led them to portray the Khasis in such a negative manner.

The Karbis believe that after death, souls enter *Chom Arong*. The most significant role in death rituals is that of the *Charhepi* (dirge singer) and *Deori* (priest). The *Charhepi* sings about the life of the deceased, guides the soul to the routes to be taken, and recounts the Karbi's migration history. She is the official weeper in the Karbi society, who weeps on behalf of the family. She is the person responsible for guiding the soul to its proper abode. According to a legend, the *Chom Arong* has a proper place known as Lang-Serve, which is on an inaccessible hill called *Mukindan Arlong*. One of the *Charhepi* informed the author that in *Chom Arong*, the dead reside the same way as the living. They cultivate food, perform chores, dress up, and make merriment, just as they did on earth. Thus, it is crucial to make elaborate arrangements for all the things required by the dead to sustain themselves in *Chom Arong*. As the Karbis are traditionally cultivators, they usually arrange to gift the family of the deceased certain animals such as pigs, goats, cows, and chickens for rearing and consumption. The scale of the festival requires that the host family is of sound financial status, as the arrangement for their ancestors can be very elaborate and expensive.

The *Chomangkan* ritual is not performed as an immediate funeral because of the scarcity of time and the huge amount of money required for it (Zaman 2003). However, it is through *Chomangkan* that the family of the deceased can ensure that their beloved deceased family member is given a proper send-off to *Chom Arong*. According to *Thireng Vangreng* (a mythical person with the ability to transport himself to *Chom Arong* and the land of the living), some souls were roaming aimlessly and were neither in the realm of the dead nor of the living. As he could portal himself to the land of the living, he instructed the living descendants to perform rituals for them. He is said to have designed the funeral rituals performed during *Chomangkan*. There is no concept of judgement, and all souls can enter *Chom Arong*, provided the necessary rituals are performed. Not every family is affluent enough to perform *Chomangkan*, although the dead can move in the journey to the ancestral land only through this observance. This seems to suggest the importance attached to economic status and being 'wealthy', which is a pre-requisite if the soul is to pass to *Chom Arong*. The *Chomangkan*, therefore, is a privilege of the 'wealthy' in Karbi society.

5. Chomangkan and Its Types

There are many types of *Chomangkan*. There are differences in dialect depending on the region, and the *Chomangkans* are known by different names. The region-wise celebration of *Chomangkan* displays some distinct features, including ritual types such as *Nodak Langtuk*, *Hongvat-Ingdeng-kethom*, and *Mirko-i-kelo*. Some regions observe such rituals in *Chomangkan* and thus assume a distinct form of *Chomangkan* different from the others. However, in general, only three types of *Chomangkans* are recognized, namely *Harne*, *Langtuk*, and *Kanplapla* (Bordoloi 1982).

Harne Chomangkan occupies the top-most position amongst all the *Chomangkans*, as it is observed only by those people with high positions in society. The 'high' position here refers to those who wield positions in traditional institutions and exert considerable power and influence in society. Next, *Langtuk Chomangkan* is performed by people who wield considerable status and power in society, though they are of slightly lower status than those who observe *Harne Chomangkan*. *Langtuk Chomangkan* derives its name from *Langtuk* (dug pit for drinking water), although even in *Harne Chomangkan*, *Langtuk* is made. *Langtuk* is dug to provide water for the deceased in the afterlife. Usually, a bust made of stone or mud is erected near the *Langtuk*, in both cases to symbolize the body of the deceased.

In the case of *Harne Chomangkan*, *Jambili Athon* (a community totem pole) is also erected on four sides of the *Langtuk*, and one is erected beside the bust of the deceased. *Jambili Athon* is a community totem with religious and cultural significance. It is a totem that cannot be owned personally and is kept only with individuals who have affiliations in the cultural Karbi institutions such as *Sarthe* (village headman), *Karbi recho*, and the Council of Ministers. *Jambili Athon* is a traditional woodcraft of the Karbis. It is made from the wood of *Bengvoike er* (*Wrightia coccinea* Sims. Apocynaceae). As per the customary laws of the Karbis, not all artisans can create *Jambili Athon*, and only a subset of skilled artisans known as *Baroi* can do so.

Symbols are gestures that are at the core of human communication and are important for people to understand recognizable meanings shared by people in a society. Here, *Jambili Athon* is a symbol that signifies the unity between the different clans of the Karbi community. According to E. A. Hoebel (1958), “a totem is an object, often an animal or a plant, held in special regard by the members of a social group who feel that there is a peculiar bond of emotional identity between themselves and the Totem.” It is described as a system of classification or cosmology whereby a tribe adopts the species of nature and sees itself in relation to that order. It provides them with a model whereby they can design relations that are complementary and cooperative to their clan order. The *Jambili Athon* is a black-colored totem pole crafted of wood, with a central axis and four lateral branches. A *vojaru* bird is placed on the top; *vorale* birds are also fixed on the other lateral branches. The Karbis regard *vojaru* as the king of the birds, as it is believed to lead all other birds. The bird is a symbol for the Karbi king, who leads a council of ministers known as *Habe-Pinpo*. Although the Karbi king is the titular head of the Karbi community, the other ministers command importance and enjoy distinct power. This is represented by the different branches in *Jambili Athon*, where the topmost branch is symbolized by the Karbi king, and the lower lateral branches signify the power and position of the other ministers. The five branches in the *Jambili Athon* are associated with the five clans of the Karbi tribe. Together, they constitute a community totem whose usages were very distinct at the time of the *Chomangkan*. *Jambili Athon* as a totem thus upholds clan unity and keeps the community organized. This dovetails with Geertz’s (1971) notion of culture as an arrangement of meanings manifested in symbols through which human beings interact, maintain, and advance their knowledge about the world.

The erection of five *Jambili Athon* in *Harne Chomangkan* testifies to the high status enjoyed by the deceased when they were alive. In the case of *Langtuk Chomangkan*, only one *Jambili Athon* is erected near the bust of the deceased, and four bamboo poles are erected instead. This indicates that the deceased enjoyed some considerable social position, though their rank was lower than the deceased of *Harne*. The third type of *Chomangkan*, known as the *Kanplapla Chomangkan*, is meant to be the *Chomangkan* for the common people. No *Jambili Athon* is used, and they are relatively private, as the rituals can be performed at home. For *Harne* and *Langtuk Chomangkan*, the festivities and rituals are conducted in open fields where crowds gather.

6. Rituals in *Chomangkan*

i. Rituals on the first day

The *Chomangkan* festival is replete with rituals. Rappaport (1999, p. 24) defines rituals as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.” The first day of *Chomangkan* kickstarts with a ceremony called *Aru-kehumi* (literally: bringing back the deceased soul from the cremation ground to their ancestral house), in which the *Duhuidi* (master drummer) has to bring his group of male drummers and perform drumming. During *Aru-kehumi*, there is a procession by the family of the deceased to the cremation ground, called the *tipit*, and a small hole is dug⁷. Moreover, a *cowrie* is laid inside to represent the deceased’s body. A male member of the family, known as the *tirikam*, tries to dig the *cowrie* with a long *dao* or sword. The *Duhuidi* beats the drum, and the *tirikam* also moves the *dao* up and down, matching the

drumming. A woman who must be of the same clan as the deceased has to hold a black scarf and move the scarf up and down to match the beats of the drum. When the *Duhuidi* indicates through the drumbeats that they can take out the *cowrie*, representing the dead body, the *tirikam* digs it out with the long *dao*, and they place it on the black scarf and wrap it up. Then, they offer food known as *anjam* (including rice beer, betel leaves, areca nut, and cooked food), prepared especially for the dead by the *Uchepi* (a cook who prepares a meal for the deceased). This is a meaningful ceremony, as the family and friends get an opportunity to have a meal together with the deceased symbolically and offer gifts and other necessities required in the afterlife.

After offering *anjam*, two male youths wearing their traditional attire dance. They carry a sword and a shield and dance around the *anjam* where food is offered for the dead. In most ethnic groups, dance rituals of the dead are performed because they sustain the social organization through grieving together and celebrating the life of the deceased. It also fosters a sense of solidarity among members of the community. The dance moves must match the drumming and proceed slowly at the beginning of the dance but gain speed at the end. This is the first of the many dances performed during *Chomangkan*, and if they do not perform this on the first day, they cannot perform any dances after that. The *Charhepi* also plays a crucial role during *Chomangkan*. She performs weeping for the host family and guides the soul through the journey to *Chom Arong*, as she recounts the oral epic *Kecharhe Alun* (Lyall 2011). *Kecharhe Alun* is the most significant aspect of the death rituals of the Karbis. It is an oral epic that, though not recorded, is regarded as longer than Homer's *Iliad*. The *Kecharhe Alun* furnishes eloquent narratives of venerable terrains and markers, along with their occupants (fauna and other living beings), recognized in Karbi folklore as significant descriptors and indicators of long-lost ancestral migration passages. One *Charhepi* stated that the journey is not easy, as the souls must pass through challenging terrains. Usually, a group of *Charhepi* weeps for the entirety of the rituals associated with *Chomangkan*. Their work starts from the *tipit* to the end of the festival.

The drummers will beat the drum when the rituals are over and a new one has begun. The two dancers performing at the *tipit* must dance to the *Banjar* site with a sword and shield. A *Banjar* is a resting place of the soul during the journey from the land of the dead to the land of the living. The two dancers will dance around the *Banjar* three times, matching the drumming. The *Charhepi*, too, will sing a song of lamentation and weep. A ceremony called *Nodak Alangtuk* is performed near the *Banjar* site called *Hongthor*. This ceremony is performed for those women whose earlobes were snapped when they were alive. In the olden days, Karbi women adorned themselves with traditional earrings called *Nothengpi* (usually made of silver; here, 'no' refers to ears and 'thengpi' means tree). *Nothengpi* earrings resemble miniature trees and are heavy, and constantly wearing them for an extended period can lead to snapping of the ears. It is believed by the Karbis that women with snapped earlobes are forbidden to drink water in *Chom Arong*. This ceremony is thus performed to quench their thirst by digging a small well and sacrificing a small chicken.

A flattened form of rice known as *sangpher* is distributed to all present in *Hongthor*, and it is to be consumed immediately. The family and the procession group then make another procession to return home, carrying the *cowrie*. The *Duhuidi* and his band of drummers beat the drum vigorously to indicate this move. A group of women called *obok* (colloquial meaning: 'babysitter') carries the *cowrie* in a traditional cot called *piba* to the house of the deceased. The *cowrie* is then put inside an effigy made of straw. Immediately after reaching the house, a group of men and women will engage in pretend play. The pretend play reenacts the final days of the deceased, such as the day the deceased fell sick, and a ritual is performed to ascertain the cause and cure of the illness. The family will also pretend to try all means possible to save the person, all of which are in vain. The effigy will then be declared dead, and a group of *Charhepi* will perform weeping for the family.

At night, young men will gather and sing *kappa-er alun* (meaning 'to incite'). This song is sung for three nights after completing all rituals for the day, and the male youths gather

and gossip about women's bodies and matters concerning sexuality. This usually erupts into loud laughter and is considered a light moment to entertain the male youths.

ii. Rituals on the second day

The second day is considered a rest day, and no major rituals are performed. However, a funeral pyre called *Methur-hem-kim* is constructed, which is to be used on the fourth day. At night, a group of young male dancers will perform a type of dance known as *Kansopado* (here, *Kanso* means small and *pado* means to be held). *Kansopado* comprises a set of short dances. All the small dances that cannot be performed on the third day have to be performed during *Kansopado*. The host family must sacrifice a hen in honor of the *Risomar* (male youth). The sacrificial hen symbolizes an invitation to the group of male youths or *Risomar* to take part in dancing during the *Chomangkan* festival.

iii. Rituals on the third day

On the third day, the male family members of the deceased from both the maternal and paternal side will go to the forest to cut five bamboo poles, which are to be used in the ceremonial ground in the open fields. The *Duhuidi*, with his band of drummers, accompanies them, and a strict rule has to be observed while cutting the trees. A hen is sacrificed before cutting the bamboo to propitiate the gods. The drummer will drum and indicate to the family members when they can use the sword. The drumming and cutting are synchronous, and drumming stops when the required bamboo trees are collected. These bamboo poles are to be used in the *Langtuk noddak* ceremony. A procession is carried to the place where the well has been dug. *Klengsarpo* will carry *Jambili Athon* or the bamboo pole depending on the status of the deceased and erect it on the four sides of the *Langtuk*, providing ample water sources for the deceased in the afterlife. Again, animals such as pigs and chickens will be sacrificed and cooked to offer food for the deceased, and the gathered people will consume it together. The *Charhepi* sings another round of weeping in the *Langtuknoddak*.

In the afternoon, an invitation ceremony called *Ari Rongketon* has to be performed. The host is called *Ari*, and he must make formal invitations to the nearby village parties known as *Chomfang*. The invitation is made by carrying the *Jambili Athon* to the nearby villages, accompanied by the drummer drumming along the way and inviting the drummer of the village to join in. As is customary, betel nuts, betel leaves, and *Horlang* (rice beverage) are offered to the village headmen as formal invitations. The *Chomfangs* have to bring their own *Jambili Athon*, which the *Klengsarpo* carries. Some village parties can attend without a formal invitation to extend their solidarity. The host party performs several dances when the village parties arrive after receiving a formal invitation from *Ari Rongketon*. This ceremonial dance is called *Chomsinnang*. This dance is divided into two types, namely *Chomsokedam* and *Chompikedam*. In the *Chomsokedam* dance, the male dancers dance with a group. The dance performed resembles a warrior dance, as the male dancers wear traditional attire with ornaments and carry a wooden decorated sword (*Nok*) and shield and dance matching the rhythm of the drumbeats. The drummers should all come from one village party. At the beginning of this dance, all the dancers dance together and form one group, but, later, they split and form two dance groups dancing in two opposite directions, lifting their swords up and down. The dancers engage in a dance move that mimics fighting against each other to signify the warriors' fight against evil spirits. The host village begins the dance, followed by the dance groups of other villages carrying the *Jambili Athon*. Similar to most dances, the dancers have to perform according to the beats of the drum, so those dance groups with no drum and drummer are forbidden to perform.

In the *Chompikedam* dance, the dancing parties may dance without drums. Just as in the *Chomsokedam* dance, the first lead of two male dancers must be provided by the host of the *Ari*. In this dance, two male dancers with their traditional attire and jewelry carry swords and shields and dance in opposite directions. They must cross each other three times during the dance, which shows the number of completed rounds. After their performance, other dancing parties carrying the *Jambili Athon* may perform. In the *Chompikedam* dance, they

make the drumbeats up and down, and they should use two drums at a minimum. They create two different drumbeats for the two dances.

During the performance of this dance, another ritual called *Horchimai* is performed simultaneously. This ritual involves the *Chomfang* offering presents to the hosts. It could be anything that people consider necessary for the deceased in the afterlife, and the Ari and the *Chomfang* exchange *Horlang* (*Horchimai* means to taste the beverage). It is a formal expression of gratitude from the host to the *Chomfang*. It also highlights the more extensive community network that functions on the solidarity of everyone in the group. All throughout the ceremonies, the *Charhepi* will continue weeping.

At the end of the *Chomangkan* ritual, the *Nimso Kerung* dance is performed at night. The male and female youth from both the host and the guest villages participate in the dance. This dance is chiefly meant for the youth of marriageable age of the villages participating in the festival, as it provides them a platform for courtship and merriment. Performed in circles with an equal number of male and female participants, the arrangement is such that a female dancer is positioned between two male dancers. It starts with the dancers holding hands, which later changes to holding each other's waists. As it is a courtship dance, and the Karbis have strict rules of exogamy, the male and female holding hands should not belong to the same clan. The girls usually cover their faces with a piece of fabric or shawl known as '*piba*' and '*pe-kelok*', which is intended to guard them from public gaze. At the time of the recital of the *Kapa-er* song in the background, the women are objectified, and their bodies become the topic of slander. The covering of their faces, therefore, saves them from embarrassment in that situation. It may be noted that the *Jili* song is sung by both male and female singers, and the theme is about damsel's youthfulness and readiness for courtship. The song is as follows:

Nisoke Rupjili Rangno
Jili ne nang oso ako
Rongroke nangjui rap longlo
Ha'e se se sesese
Pangrum kephurui amekso
Choran ke durmi adukso
Jirhu kenangtun bap arvo
Lasi li choran kecho
 (Free translation:
Jili, when you were a little girl
 We played together in the village
 We used to collect small bamboo stems
 Cook food with sand
 Prepare curry with wild leaves
 So, with this, remember how we ate the food playfully)

It is important to note that the singing of the *Jili* song is initiated by the male youths as they make the first move in courtship. The female youths await to be invited as part of the dancing troupe, and this is done to the chosen individual by the female dancers who are already participating in the dance. The crucial process of selecting a partner for dancing and singing of the *Jili* song is done in the public space only in *Chomangkan*. The role of the members of the Karbi community in this event highlights the centrality of ensuring the clan network and relationship through the selection of a life partner. The social organization of the Karbis is in this way sustained, since the rules of marriage are strictly followed, requiring approval of the whole society.

iv. Rituals on the final day

The fourth or the final day is called *Arongkethon* (sending back to the village). The effigy will be carried on a *dula* (bier) to the *tipit*, where it will be cremated for the final time, signifying the end of the deceased's journey and a proper send-off to *Chomarong*. Before going to the *thiri* (cremation ground), an essential ceremony called *Mosera kihir* is performed.

Mosera kihir is considered an essential oral epic, and both scholars and historians (Teron 2008; Timung 2003; Terang 2003; Lyall 2011) consider it a potent source for understanding the Karbi's history. The *Charhepi* recites it. This song is considered sacred and cannot be recited at other times. The song not only sings an a of the personal lives of the deceased but narrates the origin of the world, the origin of the Karbi community, the migration journey, the challenges they have to undergo, and so on. Undoubtedly, *Mosera Kihir* remains an essential source for understanding the history of the Karbis, who do not have written records, as the migration memories are encoded in epics such as this. In this regard, the role of the *Charhepi* cannot be overlooked, as they are the living repository of this knowledge. Right from the first day of *Chomangkan* to the final day, the role of the *Charhepi* is spectacular as they guide the soul on their journey to *Chom Arong* and perform weeping instead of the family.

Next, after the *Mosera* duel, the journey to the *thiri* (cremation ground) is undertaken by the family and *Chomfangs* accompanied by the *Charhepi* and a band of drummers. The effigy will be carried by the same *dula* by the male youths, and a procession will be undertaken. Just as with all rituals, the synchronization of drumming can be observed. On the way, they will similarly pass through the *Langtuk*, where small sacrifices will be made again before resuming their final journey. All the steps to be undertaken are marked through drumming. After arriving at the *thiri*, a small hen will be sacrificed to signify the last meal for the deceased, so that they will have the stamina to finish the journey. The funeral pyre is called *Banjar*, and four posts are erected to support it.

Here, *Banjar Kekan* is performed, also considered the concluding dance. The male youths of the host village perform this dance. The *Banjar Kekan* derives its name from the dancers dancing carrying the *Banjar* posts (the word *banjar* refers to the decorative bamboo posts). The dancers need to complete four rounds of this dance. In the first round, the able-bodied young men carry the *Banjar* posts in their hands and go round and round in the front courtyard, dancing to the beats of the drum played by *Duhuidi* and shouting *Hei-O, Hei-O, Hei-O*. In the second round, the male dancers divide into two groups, carry *banjar* posts with their hands, and stand opposite each other. Then, the two groups will advance in great force and cross each other. The dance moves make it seem as if they are ready to fight against each other in a battle. This second round is known as *Vorek Cherchu*.⁸ In the third round, the dancers perform a dance known as *Kekan-kengphu-chenep*. In this dance, the group runs in circles around the *Pirsik* (bamboo poles that are erected on the four sides of *Langtuk*), holding one another's thighs and running with one leg while holding the thigh of the other dancer. They keep dancing until they become tired. Just near the completion of the dance, they will disengage their hands, lift their hands, and say *Hiya-O, Heiya-O*. Since this dance requires stamina and energy, they always keep the duration short. The fourth and last round is called *Keng-Chevek*. Here, *Keng* means legs, and *Chevek* means interlocking. The youth perform this dance by going around in circles, interlocking their legs with each other. The dancers will clap their hands and shout *Heiya-O, Heiya-O* during this dance. The dance symbolizes the grueling journey the deceased has to undergo before reaching *Chom Arong*.

After performing some prayers by *Kurusar*, the effigy will be cremated, and this is followed by a loud wailing by the *Charhepi*. This then culminates in the conclusion of the *Chomangkan*, although some small rituals will be conducted by the host family when they return to the house to thank the visitors for participating in the *Chomangkan*.

The outlook of the community about death and living is reflected in the *Chomangkan* festival. Death, though a somber event, is looked upon positively, as it is not an end but just a journey, since the soul is eternal. This transition to the afterlife is considered celebratory. Moreover, it provides the family and the deceased an opportunity to bid each other a good farewell; therefore, merriment and celebrations are upheld at the same time as weeping. Pleasure is not looked down upon, as can be observed in the feasting, singing, dancing, and courting; this signifies that the Karbis regard pleasure as an essential component for

living a joyful life. In this spirit, the celebration of such in *Chomangkan* is an assertion of their beliefs that life is meant to be enjoyed.

7. *Chomangkan* in Contemporary Times

The community network is the driving force behind the *Chomangkan* festival because the observance of this festival is not possible for a single family without the community's support. *Ajir Kedun* is a very strong system embedded in all walks of community life. In the past, because of the community ownership of land, a ritual of one family was considered a ritual of the entire village. It was also possible for most people to perform *Chomangkan* because the system allowed for joint community efforts. As such, the Karbi identity in the past was firmly situated in the community network. However, this concept is disintegrating as people have migrated to urban areas, and the heterogeneous backgrounds of urban settlements do not allow people to interact in clan-based groups. Furthermore, urban areas lack spaces to host a festival such as *Chomangkan*, as they are mostly performed in the village fields, whilst the visitors are housed in makeshift huts prepared by the villagers in their residential compounds.

The conversion of the Karbis to other religions, particularly Hinduism and Christianity, has reduced the number of people following animistic belief systems. The Karbi converts have largely given up animistic practices, and because of this, the practitioners are limited to only a few ardent followers of animism. Thus, in contemporary society, the majority of Karbis are not in favor of the elaborate animal sacrifice. [Schaflechner \(2018\)](#) observed that Hindu festivals and rituals are centered around sacredness and strict observances of taboos associated with it. The taboos include blood sacrifice, consuming alcohol, eating fish and meat, or picnicking or partying around places of worship. In fact, consumption of meat in and around sacred places and especially during rituals is strictly forbidden, and only items of fruits or vegetables are offered to the deities. The changes that came about with the new faiths have affected the socio-religious life of Karbi society.

The *Chomangkan* festival is performed with various experts who officiate in the rituals, and this is evident in the many designations such as *Charhepi*, *Kurusar*, and *Duhuidi*. Such experts have been reduced to a few in contemporary society, as the Karbi community has experienced various changes with modernization and globalization. The paucity of finances to perform the elaborate rituals has been a key factor for the decline of the *Chomangkan* festival. The majority of Karbis today are not ready to spend huge sums of money for this, and they no longer perceive it to be a crucial part of their socio-cultural activities. There are efforts made by individuals and community groups, including the District Authority, towards preservation of the age-old traditional institutions associated with Karbi culture, although much needs to be done in this field. The reconstruction of Karbi history and culture assumes importance as the Karbis do not have a script, and therefore have no written history. In this regard, *Chomangkan* may be taken to be a rich cultural repository, and the importance of documentation, both oral and written, cannot be overemphasized.

8. Conclusions

The concept of death in the Karbi society is complex and has been made increasingly so by the influence of new faiths upon notions of the dead and belief in the afterlife. The *Chomangkan* may be understood as a communal festival in the event of a death, which brings the members of the clans together. It provides merriment to the people through singing, dancing, and feasting; provides a set ground for the youth for courtship; provides the host family an opportunity to pay homage and propitiate the ancestors' spirits; and allows the community to recount their past and the ordeal they went through. However, the *Chomangkan* is also a tradition that showcases both the world of the dead and that of the living. The elaborate scope of the ritual may have been a gradual process that came about with the urbanization of Karbi society. The kinship network that is symbolized in the *Chomangkan* ensures that ancestor worship is kept alive. All members of the social organization come together in the ritual of the dead, which then sustains the clan system and

preserves traditional beliefs and cultural identity despite the strong influence of Hinduism and other religions.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, L.H. and R.L.; methodology, L.H. and R.L.; writing—original draft preparation, L.H.; writing—review and editing, L.H. and R.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Jhum Cultivation is another name for shifting cultivation and is predominantly practised in the northeastern states of India. In this type of agricultural system, tracts of land are cleared by burning and cultivated for a few years which is then left fallow for regeneration of the vegetation.
- ² This is a traditional administrative system of the Khasis and the Jaintias.
- ³ The five clans are mostly addressed as Hanjang, Tungjang, Lijang, Kronjang and Ejang. However, at times one predominant sub-clan from each clan assumes the synonym of the clan.
- ⁴ Bhattacharjee (2020) argues that due to the large scale conversion there has been a change in the religious and cultural practices of the Karbis which significantly differed from those Karbis practising animistic beliefs. The most notable changes are changes in religious symbols, traditional dress, marriage system, rituals offerings and in the space of worship.
- ⁵ Ramsing Ronghang is the present traditional king of the Karbis. The Karbi king is always elected from the Ejang clan. Traditionally, he holds powers over administrative and religious aspects of the Karbi community, although today the power of the seat is diminishing as modern institutions have replaced many roles that were traditionally assigned to him.
- ⁶ The two dirger singers are Kave Hansepi (64 years) and Kajir Hansepi (67 years) and are residents of Langlokso, Karbi Anglong district.
- ⁷ After cremation, a small bone of the deceased is buried so that it can be dug up during Chomangkan.
- ⁸ *Vorek-charchu* literally means the fight of the fowls. In the Karbi society, it is a tradition for people to raise fowl for engaging them in a fight which is considered an amusement form of sport. The dance mimicking the fowl fight symbolizes the struggle of the soul as they leave the land of the living to go to *Chom Arong*.

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