

# Totemic Beliefs and Biodiversity Conservation Among the Karbis of Assam, India

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## Abstract

Biodiversity loss is recognized as an important global issue, affecting the life of the people, especially the tribal people and all those myriad species who live and co-exist along with them. The tribal people being the forest dwellers, always try to adjust according to their physical surroundings, and in doing so, they have developed a sense of belief systems, which had always guided their social, cultural and religious aspect of life in a sustainable way. The tribal people believe that, they have a bizarre relation with some plant and animal species, so they desire to preserve and never go for consume such plants and animals. Moreover, they believe that their clans are associated with a particular plant or animal species which ultimately became their totemic object. In this context, the present study focuses on identifying the totemic beliefs of the Karbis with the aim that such indigenous belief systems could help in the conservation of biodiversity and ultimately in the preservation of their belief system.

**Keywords:** Totemic beliefs, biodiversity, clan, conservation, indigenous beliefs.

## Introduction

Biological diversity – or biodiversity – is the term given to the variety of life on Earth, including plants, animals and micro-organisms, as well as the ecosystems of which they are part (CBD, 2005: xv). According to Article-2 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) “*Biological Diversity*” means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems (CBD, 2005:5).

Biodiversity loss is recognized as an important global issue, In order to mitigate the biodiversity loss, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the convention is one of the three “Rio Convention”, emerging from the UN Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) that was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, August-September 2002, stated that in spite of significant efforts, the loss of biodiversity worldwide was continuing at an unprecedented speed and that a reverse in this on-going decline should urgently be realized (Hens and Nath, 2003).

The world view and religious beliefs of many indigenous communities living in close communion with nature are often rooted in nature and speak of affinity with the plant and animal world, which in turn leads to sustainable use and conservation of nature (Western and Wright, 1994).

The belief system is that the gods protect the community members from harm, famine, barrenness, impotence, drought, epidemics, and war among others. The gods avenge their anger on whoever omits or commits any flaw for which their presence forbids, hence, the cultural system holds to a very high esteem all the precepts of the laws of the gods (Shastri *et al.*, 2002). The species that were regarded as sacred multiplied because clans associated their survival with a totem animal and never allowed that animal to become extinct. Totemism thus became an effective tool of conserving wildlife.

Regarding conservation of resources, in time past, local or tribal people have developed a variety of resource management practices that continue to exist in tropical Africa, Asia, South America, and other parts of the world (Appiah-Opuku, 2007; cited in Rim-Rukeh *et al.*, 2013). Indigenous people have rich and diverse cultures based on a profound spiritual relationship with their land and natural resources. Indigenous peoples do not see themselves as outside the realm of nature, but as a part of nature, and they have their own specific attachment to their land and territory and their own specific modes of production based on a unique knowledge of their environment. Indigenous communities have kept their cultures alive by passing on their worldview, their knowledge and know-how, their arts, rituals and performances from one generation to the next. Preserving their cultural heritage has also included speaking and teaching their own languages, protecting their sacred and significant sites and objects (Kipuri, 2009). The indigenous peoples being affinity with the forest, they have developed a sense of belief system, which had always guided their social, cultural, and religious aspect of life in a sustainable way. Among the Karbis bamboo is widely used in almost all the rituals mainly known as *Anghoi-*

*Alankpong* for sitting and drinking arrangement for the deities (Timung and Singh, 2015).

The tribal people believes that they have a mysterious relationships with some plants and animals, so they never go for collecting or consuming in case of plants and never go for killing or eating in case of animals. Moreover, they extract their clan names from those particular plants or animals, which ultimately became their totemic objects. According to Frazer, “a totem is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and all together special relation.....the connection between man and his totem is mutually beneficent; the totems protect the man, and the man shows his respect for the totem in various ways, by not killing it if it be an animal, and not cutting or gathering it if it be a plant. As distinguish from fetish, a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects” (Frazer, 1887:1-2). Totemism has been important in the religious life of the tribal people. It is a common feature of the tribal population and all these tribes consider that the totemic plants or animals have helped or protected their respective ancestors of the clan concerned or have proved to be of some peculiar use or service, the people show reverence for and do not destroy their totem objects. They also refrains from eating their fruits or flowers (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1985:243).

**Objectives:** The present paper attempts to study the totemic beliefs of the Karbi tribe of Assam. The paper also attempts to identify the significance of totemic belief in biodiversity conservation.

**Materials and Methods:** For the present study data were collected from the Karbi Anglong district of Assam (India). In-depth interviews were use to get the relevant information. A total of 15 (Fifteen) key informants were interviewed using the interview schedule from the purposively selected villages. The data were collected during December 2014 –February 2015. In addition, secondary data was obtained from the literature review.

### Discussion

Totemism has been important in the cultural and religious life of the Karbis. The Karbis considered a number of plants and animals as a totemic object. The Karbis revere different species of plants and animals as sacred and they never go for collecting or consuming in case of plants and never go for killing or eating in case of animals, because they beliefs that such plants or animals have helped or protected their respective ancestors in some way or the other. There are both community and clan based totemic object. The different totemic beliefs of the Karbis are as follows:

Besides there are a numbers of totemic beliefs of the Karbis, such as killing of Tigers, elephants and other cats’ family is a taboo for those Karbi who worshipped the spirits of those animals, and such worship is known as ‘Nibot karon-Sonpi Sonbon’ (Worships/propitiation to the spirits of Tigers, Elephants and other animals). The worshippers of kiling Arnam, including those Karbi who resides in the kiling region also never kill the cats’ family. Likewise, those who perform the ritual of ‘Dor’ never kill the snakes. ‘Rui-Teron’ (a particular kind of snake) is sacred for the Teron clan, while Tokbis revere the eagles. Lo-Teron tree in spite of being good firewood is sacred for the Teron clan, and hence it is a taboo for them to use it even it is not allowed to touch the tree (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011).

Among several totems, in the present study twelve totems commonly believed among the Karbi tribe were identified. Majority of the totems (nine) were animal-based while three plants were noted as plant based. It is also observed that the beliefs were said to be in practice by the Karbis till now.

Sl.No	Totem			Associated Clan/sub-clan	Belief(s)
	Local Name	Common Name	Scientific name		
1	Vo-Terang	Hornbill	<i>bucerotiformes</i>	Terang	As per the beliefs, one of the brothers of Terang clan was saved by the bird when the other brother tries to kill his own brother.
2	Chehang	Monitor Lizard	<i>varanus indicus</i>	Kiling (Sub-clan of Timung)	The clan strictly prohibits the killing of Monitor Lizard believing that the reptile is the vehicle of Killing deity.
3	Vomumpo	Pinon-Imperial Pigeon	<i>ducula pinon</i>	Timung	Killing the bird may cause health issues to the associated clan, there is also a beliefs that once the bird have save the life of one of the clan members thus they never go for killing or injured the birds.
4	Ingsum	(a kind of plant)	<i>antidesma acidum retz.</i>	Engti/Ingti	Beliefs that, the plant has once saved the life of the clan members during severe floods. Thus the clan members never consumed or touch the plants.
5	Vojaru	Racket-tailed Drongo	<i>dicrurus paradiseus</i>	Whole Karbi Community	The crafted bird is seen atop of the 'Jambili athon'[1]. The bird is beliefs to be the King of birds, and is compared with the traditional Karbi king. Thus they pay respect for the birds and never kill it.
6	Arhi	(a kind of plant)	<i>callicarpa arborea roxb.</i>	Rongpi	It is beliefs that, cutting/touching the plant can cause hand rashes to the Rongpi clan; moreover it is beliefs that the plant has saved the life of the clan members during severe floods. The plant is also used during the rituals of 'Chojun'[2] and is beliefs as one of the sacred plants of 'arnam kethe'.
7	Karpu	Pangolin	<i>manis crassicaudata</i>	Rongpi; Timung	Rongpi clan beliefs that, it has once helped the clan members by showing the path during jhum cultivations. While Timung clan beliefs that the animal has saved their life during war. During the war they defeated and were locked in a room. The house was then set to fire by their enemies, but luckily they found pangolin digging hole to escape. They followed the pangolin and found themselves in the forest. Thus from that day they never kill the pangolin and counted as their own clan member.
8	Voleng	Woodpecker	<i>picidae</i>	Engleng (sub-clan of Engti/Ingti); whole community	Beliefs that the bird has once saved their life during the war. During the war, the clan member was forced to hide on the jungles at that time the bird provides food for them as they were hungry. The crafted bird is seen on the 'jambili athon'. Beliefs to be the followers of traditional Karbi king.
9	Methan	Dogs	<i>canis lupus familiaris</i>	Whole Karbi Community	Beliefs that during the creation of human being as Karbi, gods created two dogs namely <i>Sibong</i> and <i>Sibe</i> to guards and protects the Karbis from the haunted evil. Thus killing the animal is a serious offence for the Karbis.
10	Vojangphong	(a kind of bird)	-	Teron	They counted the bird as their own sisters and never kill them and don't allow others to kill the birds.
11	Chehe	Crab	<i>brachyura</i>	Terang; Whole Karbi Community	As per the beliefs, one of the brothers of Terang clan was saved by the bird when the other brother tries to kill his own brother. The Karbis specially the priests strictly avoid killing of crab. Killing or eating the crab can brings divine punishment to the person involved as well as their family members.
12	Tiji or Timur	(a kind of plant)	<i>garuga pinnata</i>	Whole Karbi Community	Beliefs to posses some miraculous powers. Beliefs that god first created human beings under this plants.

### Conclusion:

Forest and environment is an integral part of tribal life. The tribal utilizes the forest resources in a multifarious way - as a source of food, medicines, fuel, handicraft, household, religious practices etc.

The Karbi traditional culture, religious practices and belief system are simply inseparable without forest ecology. Their animistic religion has a deep correlation with the forest deities, soul and spirits and a number of plants and animals become culturally recognized as their totemic objects. The totemic beliefs of the Karbis are reflected in a number of their myths and legends and the practice of such belief system is one way or the other a method of biodiversity conservation. This method of conservation should be highly encouraged in all the ethnic groups and documentations of such beliefs system is highly recommended in order to protect and conserve the biodiversity, as well as for the survival of their animistic beliefs and rich cultural heritage. The role of indigenous beliefs systems cannot be neglected because it can contribute a greater extent in the conservation of biodiversity. With this aim, the Article-8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity calls for parties to

“respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvements of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilizations of such knowledge, innovations and practices” (CBD,2005: 8).

Totemism plays an important role in biodiversity conservation and is a genuine tool for natural resources. Such method of conservation needs to be encouraged as there is no element of coercion in it. Documentation of totemic beliefs is highly recommended in all ethnic groups in order to identify plants, animals and sites under cultural conservation and protection. Scientific investigation of local claims/beliefs on important species and sites is needed for scientific validation and value addition.

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## Acknowledgement

The authors express their gratefulness to all the respondents of this study for sharing their valuable knowledge regarding the totemic beliefs of the Karbi Community.

**Photographs of different animal and plant species associated with Karbi Clans:**

**Name: Vo-Terang (Hornbill)**  
**Associated Clan: Terang**  
**Photo: Google Image**

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**Name: Vo-mumpo (Pinon-Imperial Pigeon)**  
**Associated clan: Timung**  
**Photo: Google Image**

**Name: Voleng (Woodpecker)**  
**Associated: Whole Community**  
**Photo: Google Image**

**Name: Chehang (Monitor Lizard)**  
**Associated Clan: kiling (Sub-clan of Timung)**  
**Photo: Google Image**

**Name: Vojaru (Racket-tailed Drongo)**  
**Associated: Whole Community**  
**Photo: Longkiri Timung**

**Name: Ingsun (Antidesma acidum Retz.)**  
**Associated Clan: Engti/Ingte**  
**Photo: Longkiri Timung**

**Jambili Athon (Cultral symbol of the Karbis)**  
**Photo: Art By Deben Timung**

**Name: Lo-Teron**  
**Associated Clan: Teron**  
**Photo: Longkiri Timung**

**Name: Karpu (pangolin)**  
**Associated clan: Rongpi and Timung**  
**Photo: Google Image**

[1] Jambili Athon: Cultural Symbol of the Karbis.

[2] Chojun: One of the greatest rituals of Karbi. The ritual is a propitiation to 'Arnam kethe' (Supreme god/Sky god), as well as propitiation to the ancestor spirits for the family well being and prosperity.