

Book Review

The Mythistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park, edited by Dharamsing Teron & Vulli Dhanaraju, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, October 2025, pp.348, Price-Hardback \$152.00, ISBN: 9781041169451, 14 B/W Illustrations

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11.0 Introduction

The Mythistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park, is a seminal work of diverse scholarly perspectives. The book collectively advances postmodern assumptions in the multi-disciplinary framework. Innovative in reconstructing the history of the oral Karbi community, the work with its thematic abundance intricately brings together the claim that the origin of the name Kaziranga is grounded in the community's myth and history. The multi-disciplinary approaches adopted through the papers include oral history, folkloristics, ethnography, survey method, memory studies, feminist perspectives, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and cultural ecology.

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11.1 Theoretical Perspective: Privileging Orality

It is indisputable that the methods employed in academic enquiry are continually evolving. A paradigmatic shift in the methods and perspectives of enquiry took place during the late 20th century in the wake of the postmodernism. The shift has reshaped disciplinary approaches of academic enquiry. In the discipline of history, it challenged the positive rationality, notion of objectivity and singular historical narratives traditionally based on written sources and other hard evidences. At the same time, emerging approaches emphasised reflexivity, multiple perspectives and the deconstruction of grand narratives assuming historical events as contextual and socio-culturally constructed rather than being fixed or universal. As such, orality has been recognised as a source of history writing, especially of events and people of oral societies where history and knowledge are preserved in memory and transmitted from generation to generation through words of mouth.

The papers included in the book investigate the oral tradition of the Karbi people of Assam in general and myths associated with Kajir Ronghangpi, a legendary woman, who is popular as ‘Rhinoceros Lady’, in particular. The myths situate Kaziranga, the name derived from Kajir Ronghangpi and attributed to Kaziranga National Park, not just as a nature’s reserve, but construct the cultural identity of the place shaped by harmonious human–nature interactions. Varied themes such as myth and memory, cultural landscape, diversity of voices, ecological implications, gender and mythical agency, assentation of cultural identity emerge through the papers within the multi-disciplinary framework.

The structure of presentation of the book, arranged by the editors, is methodologically sound, logical and consistent with its title ‘mythistory’. The voice of Karbis echoes not in an isolationist ethnography to assert identity and to prove that subaltern can speak (See Spivak 1988), but a challenge to the power of written tradition and dominant narratives that present Kaziranga as a pristine wilderness. It accepts the relational positioning of ‘self’ through interactions and comparisons with the Ahom state and Naga tattooing. The book privileges orality over written tradition while reconstructing history of the oral communities.

Recognition of different degrees of orality in postmodern historiography has produced several genres of history like Mythistory (McNeill 1986), Oral History (Vansina 1985 and Thompson 1978), Ethnohistory (Carmack 1972), Historical Anthropology (Wolf 1982 and Mintz 1985), Narrative or Discourse History (Bloch 1953, Foucault 1969 and Habermas 1981), and so on.

Orality in its myth form is an important and major source in writing Mythistory, the term formulated by the historian William H. McNeill in 1986 and further elaborated same year (1986a) in his book *Mythistory and Other Essays*. The present book under review is situated within the framework of Mythistory through myth, memory, songs, genealogies, ritual performances, cultural logic and history of the Karbis. The mythistory has its equivalent in *Mosera kihir*, the method of reconstructing oral history coined by Dharamsing Teron.

The oral traditions, particularly folklore and mythic traditions as evident in the book serve as symbolic repositories of ecological, moral, and community consciousness of the Karbis, comparable to what Eliade (1963) advocates as 'mythic truth'. The papers in the book also display the importance of cultural and collective memory studies (Halbwachs 1992 and Assmann 2011), narrative and metahistorical approaches (White 1973 and Ricoeur 1984) and the approaches of historical anthropology (Sahlins 1985 and Geertz 1973) to reconstruct the history of the oral communities like the Karbis.

11.2 Themes, Organisation, and Perspectives

The book has two thematic sections namely, *Karbi Oral Tradition* and *Myth and History of Kajir Ronghangpi* and an *Introduction* as well. The editors have objectively laid down the theoretical framework of Mythistory in the *Introduction*. Within this framework, 16 papers on diverse perspectives have been discussed, equally distributed in alignment with the overarching perspective of each thematic section.

Section I titled *Karbi Oral Tradition*, through eight papers, establishes the cultural, ritual, ecological, historical, social and interactive background of the Karbi people of Assam. The section provides a context to understand mythistory as a disciplinary perspective and its role in identity construct of the Karbis around the legendary woman Kajir Ronghangpi. The themes covered are politics of territorial identity as is evident through Karbi relations with Ahoms, significance of oral narratives and their forms in identity construct, comparative cultural practices, concept of liminal soul, gender role in economic pursuits, and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

Chapter-I, *Interface between the Karbis and the Ahoms* by Kadombini Terangpi constructs territorial and cultural identities of the Karbis through their interface with Ahoms in course of the former's migration. The historical relationship with Ahoms was political, more of reconciliatory nature, and economic in terms of paying tribute to Ahom government and receiving permission for carrying out economic activities like cultivation, fishing, etc. The author also admits to the process of acculturation in course of Karbi-Ahom contact and interaction.

Anjana Engtipi's paper, chapter-2, titled *The Significance of Oral Narratives in Karbi Society*, is engaged with the question of ethnic origin of the Karbis as a community. The paper underscores the role of oral narratives across its different forms in the construct of cultural identity.

The joint paper of Rashmi Engtipi and Rupali Rongpipi in chapter-3, titled *Oral Narratives of Cheleng Athepai and Botor Kikur of the Karbis*, describes how the cruelty of the headman Longki Sar Enghee of village Doi-ik (now Rongmarjon) led to mass death of the members of youth dormitory (*Jirsong*) formed into *Jirkedam*, the youth labour corps to work in agriculture, on *Cheleng Athepai*, the steep mountain in Karbi area. The sad incident in the collective memory reflects in the annual worship of *Riso Arnam* (Spirit Deity of Bachelors).

The authors also discuss about the agricultural ritual, *Botor Kekur* to worship the weather spirit *Botor Sarpo* wherein the high priest narrates the legend of *Ha'imu* as rain giver. *Ha'imu*, the beautiful lady accepted death as a revenge against insult, dominance of patriarchy and torture by ruling class. After her death she became rain goddess and serves humanity. As an unfortunate lady and dictate from the chief to suppress her tale, she has been considered inauspicious because of her torture; her name is tabooed except for the priest. At the same time, she is remembered through lullabies and during *Botor Bekur*. The authors find a 'dualism of prohibition and acceptance' in the legend of *Ha'imu*. In the both narratives, cruelty and misuse of power by the chief and death as a way of escape are evident. The narratives teach us that the concentration of power (as with the chief) has the potential of exploitation and resultant death of the exploited.

In chapter 4, the paper of Resenmenla Longchar, *Making Sense of the Body: A Comparative Study of Women's Tattooing among the Karbi and the Ao-Naga*, reflects gender dimension in a comparative perspective. The paper based on the comparative study of Karbi and Ao Naga's tradition of women's tattooing suggests that through bodily expression (tattooing) women assert their identity in patriarchy by linking it with rites of passage. It is a symbol of resistance which culturally approved against kidnapping of women and a reflection of indigenous perception of art and cultural morality. The author emphasises that 'tattooing served as a significant symbol of culture, morality and one's position in society' and hold great significance 'in terms of tradition, identity and spirituality'.

Amphu Terangpi's paper, *The Concept of the Liminal Soul in Karbi Culture* (chapter-5) has a theoretical understanding of soul in Karbi Culture applying the concept of 'liminality' of Victor Turner and 'rites of passage' of Arnold Van Gannep. Rites of passage as propose by Gannep has three distinct stages, namely separation, transition and inclusion. The stages have equivalents in Karbi worldview: separation (*kithi kejang*), transition (*oso amahang kethek*) and incorporation which is reincarnation (*adam asar*). The Karbis believe that the soul is immortal, and that is why they believe that 'individuals can communicate about their past lives and choose their parents for the next generation before they die'. This belief reflects separation (death), transition (remembrance of the past and future parents of birth) and incorporation (re birth in next generation in own clan). The author has examined the concept of liminality 'relating to the profound spiritual journey of the soul'.

Barnali Sarmah's paper titled *Exploring Gender Empowerment and Economic Self-Reliance among Karbi Women: An In-depth Study* (chapter-6) examines Karbi women's economic self-reliance and empowerment amid marginalisation through weaving and farming activities. The chapter also engages our attention to how present Karbi women negotiate between traditional and modern livelihoods pursuits. The traditional sense of self-reliance and empowerment, to the author, has been marginalised in the present development interventions due to the 'absence of vocational training' and 'the lack of specialised instructions'.

In two successive chapters, *Ecological Values of the Karbi Belief System* (chapter-7) by Vulli Dhanaraju and Dawatshogmo Lama and *Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) of the Karbis: The Case of Magursila Village of Kamrup Metro District, Assam*

(chapter-8) by Barasha Rani Das and Nityananda Deka critically examine traditional ecological knowledge and practices of the Karbis. The former paper articulates the belief system, sacred groves as biodiversity hotspots, and makes a sustained analysis of how beliefs, practices, skills, and environmental knowledge are embedded in Karbi cultural life. The authors have argued how the belief in the earth and totems shapes their ecological values. The second paper makes documentation of traditional knowledge in Magursila village relating to herbal remedies, sustainable fishing food, crop management, water harvesting and natural dyes.

Section II, *Myth and History of Kajir Ronghangpi*, engages our attention with the concept of ‘mythistory’ through eight papers based on the legendary character of the woman Kajir Ronghangpi. The concept reflects in collective memory, orality and cultural practices, articulating Karbi sense of territorial, cultural and historical identity, as well as resistance to dominant narratives of wilderness. The section also reveals the existence of contesting mythic versions and the intricate interface between myth and ecology.

The first paper under Section II, i.e. chapter-9 of the book as per organisation scheme, links Kajir Ronghangpi through two versions to Rongkhang, one of the four customary provinces of the Karbis. The paper titled *The Kajir Ronghangpi: The Legends in Rongkhang* by Elwin Teron presents her descent, her migration from Rongkhang, her rhinoceros bond, her killing by Ahoms for not agreeing to the marriage proposal of Ahom noble Medhibura, her divinity, and her as a guardian of the wild.

Chapter 10 titled *The Legend of Kajir Ronghangpi through the Lens of Collective Karbi Memory*, jointly written by by Serdihun Teronpi, Beena Rongpipi, Rengka Timungpi, and Maggie Katharpi and chapter 11 titled *Exploring the Multiple Narratives of Kajir Ronghangpi* written by Junmoni Hansepi and Sumi Daa-Dhora present different versions of the legend that establish the origin of the name Kaziranga from the legendary Karbi woman Kajir Ronghangpi. Chapter 10, in addition, narrates about Karbi settlements and their relocation in Assam and indicates that Karbis were not a community in isolation even in the past. They had interaction with Ahoms and Burma and this interactive space is also evident in chapter 11 in their relations with Dimasa. Kajir is depicted as *uchepi* (divinity), a common person who loves and suffers and so on. The versions navigate her from ordinary human being to a divine person through her courage, leadership quality, sufferings, love for Rhinos and her message of harmony between human and animal. Different aspects of Kazir’s personality in collective memory of the Karbis reveal that orality is not static; it evolves adapting to differences among regions and in human capability of interpretation over time and space.

Similar idea complementing to different versions discussed above reflects in the joint paper of Langmili Terangpi, Mirbin Katharpi, and Arnika Terangpi which is titled *Kajir Ronghangpi: What Makes her a Mythological Figure in Karbi History* (chapter 12). The paper serves the purpose the section aims to convey, the relation between Kajir and Rhino having ‘transcended mere existence to become the embodiment of narrative steeped into the realms of myth and folklore. The paper, through two versions, describes about Kajir’s connection with spiritual and mortal world, her role in the introduction of rice and bringing rhinos on the earth, her becoming of the ruler, her link to sacred ecology, and above all her possession of

spiritual power. For all these attributes she is placed above any ordinary Karbi person in the oral tradition.

In chapter-13, the joint paper titled *The Story of Kajir Ronghangpi via the Memories of the Local People* by Ramesh Kathar and Sangita Das, the method of data collection is focused. The authors have interviewed Karbi intellectuals to document how different individuals recall and narrate the story of Kajir Ronghangpi from memory. Although variations exist across versions of the myth in several papers included in the book, but narratives in this chapter explicitly and consistently converge on the central figure of Kajir Ronghangpi.

How narratives in a culture construct meaning and significance of places and spaces are at the core of discussion in the following three chapters. In chapter -14, Kareng Ronghangpi in the paper titled *The Role of Narratives in Transmitting Traditional Knowledge: Exploring Anomalous Places and Spaces in Karbi Worldview in Context with Kaziranga and Other Places* recounts myths associated with places such as *Kaziranga*, *Rongbin* (the space within human beings) *Phi-Phu Arong* (village of the ancestors) and *Ritilopharla* (the space of habitation of the dead whose *chomangkan* (death rituals) are not performed). The places, which cannot be perceived in normal sense, hold philosophical significance, some in abstract terms—but collectively reveal the intellectual depth and imaginative perception embodied in the Karbi cultural worldview.

Bandita Teronpi, through her paper titled *Kajir Ronghangpi: A Living Myth and Folklore of Other Communities/Regions from Northeast India*, shown as chapter-15, situates the myth of Kajir Ronghangpi amidst the genre of myths and legends associated with tourist places in North-eastern states. She has picked up some selected stories, such as a Khasi legend from Meghalaya, Lepcha myth from Sikkim, myth from Tripura and the myth of Kamakshya temple from Assam and argues that the tourist places are ‘based on significant cultural narratives which have widespread beliefs and acceptance’. The name Kaziranga in the Kaziranga National Park, the UNESCO World Heritage Site and a tourist place in Assam has been derived from the myth of Kajir Ronghangpi in Karbi oral tradition. The theoretical premise of this paper is that the popularity of a functional site, such as a tourist destination, is intricately linked to cultural worldview and beliefs associated with it. `

A place, event, or happening may have parallel myths transcending cultural boundaries, thus exhibiting cross cultural presence of a myth. It is evident from different versions of myths of Kajir Ronghangpi discussed in several papers included in the book. In chapter-16, titled *Myth and Identity Formation: Revisiting the Oral Tradition of Kajir Ronghangpi*, Mongolsing Rongphar and Thejani-I Pohena examine the connection of cultural identity of the Karbis through different versions of the myth associated with *Kajir Ronghangpi*. They argue that revisiting myths of a community, especially a tribe, counters prevailing narratives and define a cultural identity through collective consciousness around the myth. Simultaneously, cross cultural association of the myth, with the Ahoms and the Karbis, presented by the authors questions the myth of Kajir Ronghangpi as exclusive to Karbi oral tradition. On the one hand, the myth constructs cultural identity of the Karbis and on the other, it attests to the coexistence of different communities around a place. Identity is not formed in isolation but emerges through an oppositional relationship with ‘the other’ within a shared space of co-existence.

Similarly, the myth of Kajir Ronghangpi reveals a dimension of empowerment of Karbi women. In the construction of gendered identity, Karbi women are positioned in relational opposition to men, and this identity must be understood within the context of their (Karbi men and women's) co-existence in Karbi culture. The authors of this paper have attempted to conceptualise identity in relational terms.

From a theoretical perspective, the shared space of interaction and coexistence, as evidenced in several papers, substantiates to the argument that identity question presupposes relationally; for a community existing in isolation **remains self-contained and** beyond the need of self-assertion and external recognition.

In a nutshell, sections I and II focus on either single or multiple themes pertaining to oral tradition of ecological belief and practices, cultural space and cultural persons, interaction and coexistence, questioning dominant narratives, gender and empowerment, identity formation through myths, and negotiation of space.

11.3 Critical Overview

The term mythistory in the title of the book announces that myths aren't mere stories of imagination, but constitute important sources of understanding historical sense, psychological orientation, emotional articulation, and cultural worldview of oral communities. However, the sub-title, i.e. *The Making of Kaziranga National Park* gives a different understanding about the content of the book. It points to particular agendas like conservation strategy, politics in the making of the park, or the role of myths in making the park where the papers are vocal about the name of Kaziranga. A reader can see passing references to identity politics, the establishment of the park to conserve rhinoceros, or the status of the park as UNESCO World Heritage Site, but these do not justify the sub-title. In section II, authors are engaged with theoretical and empirical insights on the topic of myth around Kazir Ronghangpi, but there are repetitions of the myth without sufficient analytical differentiation. These repetitions are often found in seminar proceedings and edited volumes. Repetitions of the myth of Kazir Ronghangpi, however, do not compromise with the overall theoretical foundation and methodological rigor of presentations. The *Introduction* chapter by the editors weaves the presentation in papers so brilliantly within the theoretical framework of mythistory that repetitions ensure clarity and readers' understanding of the significance of the myth of Kazir Ronghangpi in Karbi culture. Since the book is engaged with the Karbi culture, an appendix on glossary of native terms would have been added to the structure of the book though these terms are explained in the text. The book needed professionalism in editorial fonts- language editing, copy editing, etc.

Title of two thematic sections apparently stand inconsistent with the title of the book which holds mythistory about the nomenclature of Kaziranga. *Karbi Oral Tradition* seems a deviation from *Myth and History of Kajir Ronghangpi* that justifies the name Kaziranga belonging to Karbi culture. But succinctly, the editors have established the cultural foundation in the first section, with relational dynamics (for example relation with Ahoms and Nagas),

and then built up the edifice of the historical and territorial identity of Kaziranga through the Kajir Ronghangpi myth, marking a continuity of the logic of presentation in two sections.

On mythistory, the book, no doubt, is a pioneering work and provides a framework of reconstruction of the history of oral societies. It outlines a framework for further critical study on the subject. The book is of interest to readers, academicians, students, researchers, activists, and others engaged in tribal studies and postmodern theoretical assumptions.

11.4 Conclusion

The Mythistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park in general presents indigenous worldview, interdisciplinary approach, gender sensitivity, plurality of narratives, challenges to conventional historiographical perspective, significance of subjectivity, construction of identity in cultural and interactive space, and thus focuses on postmodern critique of the reconstruction of the history of the Karbis, a oral community of Assam, around the myth of Kajir Ronghangpi. Myths are not singled out separately, but are presented at the backdrop of the Karbi cultural worldview.

The book is a pioneering exercise in many ways. The themes discussed across the papers interact on diverse topics, such as myth, identity, empowerment, ecology, coexistence and conflict and so on of the Karbis. Its theoretical background is multi-disciplinary, and is fundamentally pluralistic and inclusive. In general, the discussions in book are in the line of Indian approaches to pluralism, rather than negating them. However, the book also points to the area of tension when tradition negotiates with modernity: conservation with degradation of ecosystem, macro development model and community perspective, education and youth's view on tradition and myths. A question is imperative: Can *Mythistory* address these tensions? Here lies further scope of investigation on the topic.

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