

# Karbi Youth Festival - Promoting a Performative Nationalism

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**Abstract:** *The Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) is a five day event celebrated annually from 15<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> February. It is claimed as one of the largest and oldest ethnic festivals in Northeast India. KYF has a long history tracing its birth and relates with the Karbi people's struggle with the youth in the forefront in their movement for identity and asserting their ethnicity. The movement for introduction of Roman Script between 1960 and early 1970 for writing in Karbi, standardizing the orthography and designing text-books in mother tongue for educational purposes indicated the growing resolve of the Karbi youth before the inception of KYF in 1974. The socio-economic and political setting prevailing then called for social action, and the KYF provided the youth a perfect stage and an expanding public space for promoting their ideas of nationalism by way of performing of various traditional dance forms, ethnic music, food and fashion while the call for preserving the dying cultural elements acted as fadders for invigorating the national imagination.*

**Keywords:** KYF, Karbi, nationalism, youth, movement, KSA, identity

## 1. Introduction

Oxford dictionary defines youth as the period between childhood and adult age. Literature defines nationalism as positive feelings towards a country. The terms youth and nationalism are intertwined as the latter is embodied fiercely by the former. Nations are regularly re-imagined by young people, who often offer visions of nationhood counter to those constructed by older generations and transmitted through such mechanisms as schooling. Anderson emphasized that '...unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers...' (Anderson, 2006). In an anthropological spirit, he proposed the definition of the nation as an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Ernest Gellner argued that 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.' Anderson criticized this formulation by saying that communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. Theories and research have identified different meanings of nationalism as an ideology, a movement, a process of nation-state building, and an individual's political orientation (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980)

National or ethnic identity, a central issue for adolescents, has been defined as a process of maintaining positive distinctiveness, and feelings associated with a sense of national/ethnic group membership (Phinney and Ong, 2007). For the purpose of advocating young generations to identify the characteristics and assessing the level of nationalism, there are several factors (Smith, 2003): loyalty, kinship, patriotic song, national team and national interest. Karbi youth demonstrating these attributes is evident if one trains a closer look at the annual 'Karbi Youth Festival' (KYF) which has since 1974 become the central focus for asserting and promoting Karbi identity through performances of traditional music, dances, food and fashion.

The term 'festival' derives from Latin word 'festum' and festivals are broadly recognized as 'celebratory events' (Pickard and Robinson, 2006). Cudny (Springer, 2016) has

stressed that the term 'is not a simple concept, easy to present', because 'researchers approach the phenomenon of festivals from a variety of ways'. He argues that there is 'no commonly accepted and precise definition of festival.' He however quoted Durkheim, among others, who saw festivals as 'effervescence...the intensity of which cements solidarity of a group or people, a representation of the invisible relationships between man and the laws of nature, a veritable institution whereby the bonds between the members of a society are maintained, regenerated and reproduced...'

In this paper attempts will be made to locate the significance and influence of the 'Karbi Youth Festival' as a community event by analyzing its historical background, imagination, performance and promotion which have contributed in the formation of Karbi nationalism in the modern times.

## 2. Objective of the Study

The Karbis who have a notably rich folklore, which includes legends about their origins following oral traditions, KYF provides a platform to explore the primordial ties of man and culture by reclaiming ethnic identity of the Karbis. The objective of the study is therefore to posit the Karbi Youth Festival as performative nationalism in the background of the decades old struggle of Karbi people to assert cultural identity and political autonomy.

## 3. Methodology

The paper is qualitative in nature and is primarily designed to collect information/data through interviews and through close knit observation of the festival. The proposed study seeks to interview the founding members of KYF according to their convenience and availability. The documentation of the festival in all available formats, viz., audio, video, souvenirs, photographs etc. is obtained from resourceful persons from different geographic locations of Karbi Anglong and beyond.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

Karbis are the largest hill tribes of Assam who live in the central part of Assam occupying the largest 'tract' covering the two Hills of East and West Karbi Anglong. The Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) is a five days long event annually celebrated from 15<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> February. During this celebration, the youth from as many as 21 zonal committees of the Karbi Cultural Society (KCS), an apex cultural body which supervises the KYF takes part in showcasing their artistic traditions – folk songs, folk dances, traditional sports, weaving, folklore, story-telling etc. Besides the youth participants, the KYF provides platform to traditional chiefs like the Lindokpo (Karbi traditional king), Pinpomar (traditional Council of Ministers), Habe (traditional territorial governors under the king) etc. whose presence reinforces cultural approval to the new forms of Karbi nationalism. The five-day event has no state agency like the police to ensure security, which is effectively managed by the KCS volunteers reflecting the traditional community concern for mutual safety. During KYF, the youth participants perform folk dances such as *Nimso Kerung* (funeral dance by the unmarried youth of both sexes), *Chong-Kedam* (shield dance), *Banjar* (related to death ritual by male performers), *Lingpum-Sokchom* (paddy husking dance), *Haccha* (annual harvest celebration dance), *Rinong-Chingdi* (farming dance performed by unmarried youth of both sexes) in accompaniment with traditional drum (*cheng*) and related folk songs. There are various competitions for folk singing and dancing, dress/fashion shows, and traditional sports etc. KYF publishes souvenirs and experiments with modern singing and dancing, western song competitions, extempore speech, poem recitation etc. which draw in new talent to explore their skills with (Dattaray, 2015). The KYF has attracted a number of tourists and have been graced by various international performers in different stages.

The KYF has played a vital role in cementing community bond and promoting cultural awareness, particularly among the youth. The youth movement for introduction of Roman Script between 1960 and early 1970 for writing Karbi, standardizing the orthography, designing the text-books in mother tongue for educational purposes signaled the first Karbi youth assertion against the Assam Official Language Act paving the way for the formation of the KYF in 1974. The specific socio-economic and political setting prevailing then provided the youth a new stage, particularly the youth for imagination of their cultural roots and their search for a public space for performing the various forms of traditional dances, ethnic music, food and fashion in order to preserve the dying cultural elements and promoting them to reinforce the idea of Karbi nationalism.

The Government of India Act, 1935 placed Karbi Anglong (erstwhile Mikir Hills) as partially excluded area. After India achieved independence, when the State Reorganization Commission (SRC) toured Assam in 1954, the tribal people including the Karbis demanded for a Hill State comprising all the autonomous Hill Districts. The tribal leaders of the various Autonomous Hill District Councils of Assam were forced to demand for separate hill state out of Assam as the Sixth Schedule autonomy 'would not satisfy the Hill tribes.'

(Ghurye, 1963; 334) They therefore submitted a memorandum to SRC demanding formation of separate hill state including United Mikir and North Cachar Hills (now Karbi Anglong and Dimahasao district) which was blatantly rejected by the Commission on grounds that the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills were not in favor of separate hill state. The ruling Karbi leaders were in opposition to the formation of separate hill state and this decision agitated many Karbi youths.

In the post independent period, the Karbi Students' Association (KSA) was the first of its kind formed in 1959 as a non-political organization to struggle for the development of the community. On the very next year of founding of KSA, the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 led to widespread agitation and the KSA became active participant of the newly formed All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC). They propagated the cause of APHLC and also advocated the use of the Roman Script for Karbi language amidst staunch opposition of ruling Karbi leaders who were then part of the Mikir Hills Autonomous District Council.

In 1973, the Roman Script movement resurfaced and the KSA demonstrated in the same year in Diphu in December. They were subjected to brutal assault by the state police and many KSA leaders were arrested and jailed. Inside prison, the idea of a Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) was developed in order to create cultural awareness and protect and promote the dying traditions of the Karbi people (Dattaray, 2015). On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1974, Karbi Youth Festival (KYF) was first held in Karbi Club, Diphu. The three-day event was held with finite number of participants, particularly the members of KSA and associates but it made a huge impact among the youth and students. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1977, a cultural body by the name 'Karbi Cultural Society' (KCS) was formed. Since then, the KCS has been directly responsible for organizing the annual KYF. The festival was held in different nooks and corners of Karbi Anglong and it became popular as the youth and students from rural Karbi Anglong rallied solidly behind it in spite of state government's apathy, refusing to give any financial assistance. The KYF promoted emotional integration of the youth and shaping their ideas of nationalism leading to youth assertion with increasing political overtones.

The Assam Accord of 1985 was a result of six-year long anti-foreigners' movement led by the Assamese student leadership under the banner of AASU which garnered the attention and support of hills tribal of Assam. But in spite of their support, the accord offered nothing for the tribal communities of the state. The tribal felt ignored and neglected by the state and resulted in a creation of virtual tribal revolt. In Karbi Anglong, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) was formed on 17 May, 1986 which paved the way for youth political intervention in the region. ASDC brought a huge number of youth in the forefront of political movement for Autonomous State whose ultimate aim was an Autonomous State under Article 244A of the Constitution. The ASDC and the ruling Congress became two opposite camps in the movement and the first split surfaced in 1986 itself even as the struggle was just beginning to be felt. One group of KSA supported the

newly created ASDC while the other rallied behind the ruling Congress. But the intensity and reach of the movement under the articulate ASDC leadership still influence the youth of the region in their cry for statehood. The youth were politically and socially awakened during this intense political struggle through their creative movement strategies appealing on the Karbi people's aspiration for political assertion. The KYF and the ASDC movement complemented each other perfectly. The ASDC movement is a perfect example of how cultural assertion leads to political assertion.

From 1994 onwards, the five-day event of the KYF began to be held at Taralungso, Diphu, with an aim to build up a cultural complex called 'Karbi People's Hall' (KPH). Thereafter, KPH became a permanent venue of KYF. The five day event from 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> February was a prominent initiative of the Karbi youth and students to preserve and propagate their oral and material culture that draws more than 2000 young rural artistes, folk singers, and dancers in their colorful traditional dresses. The KYF is promoting the preservation of the dying cultural elements through uninterrupted performances since 1974 and the Karbi youth are the driving force of the KYF's aim.

## 5. Conclusion

The KYF phenomenon presents a unique response of the indigenous Karbis against increasing marginalization where the youth play a vital role in reinforcing the idea of nationalism irrespective of their beliefs and political backgrounds. It continues to exert positive influences among the Karbi youths in carrying on the process of cultural assertion through performances of dances, songs, instruments, food, fashion and even games.

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