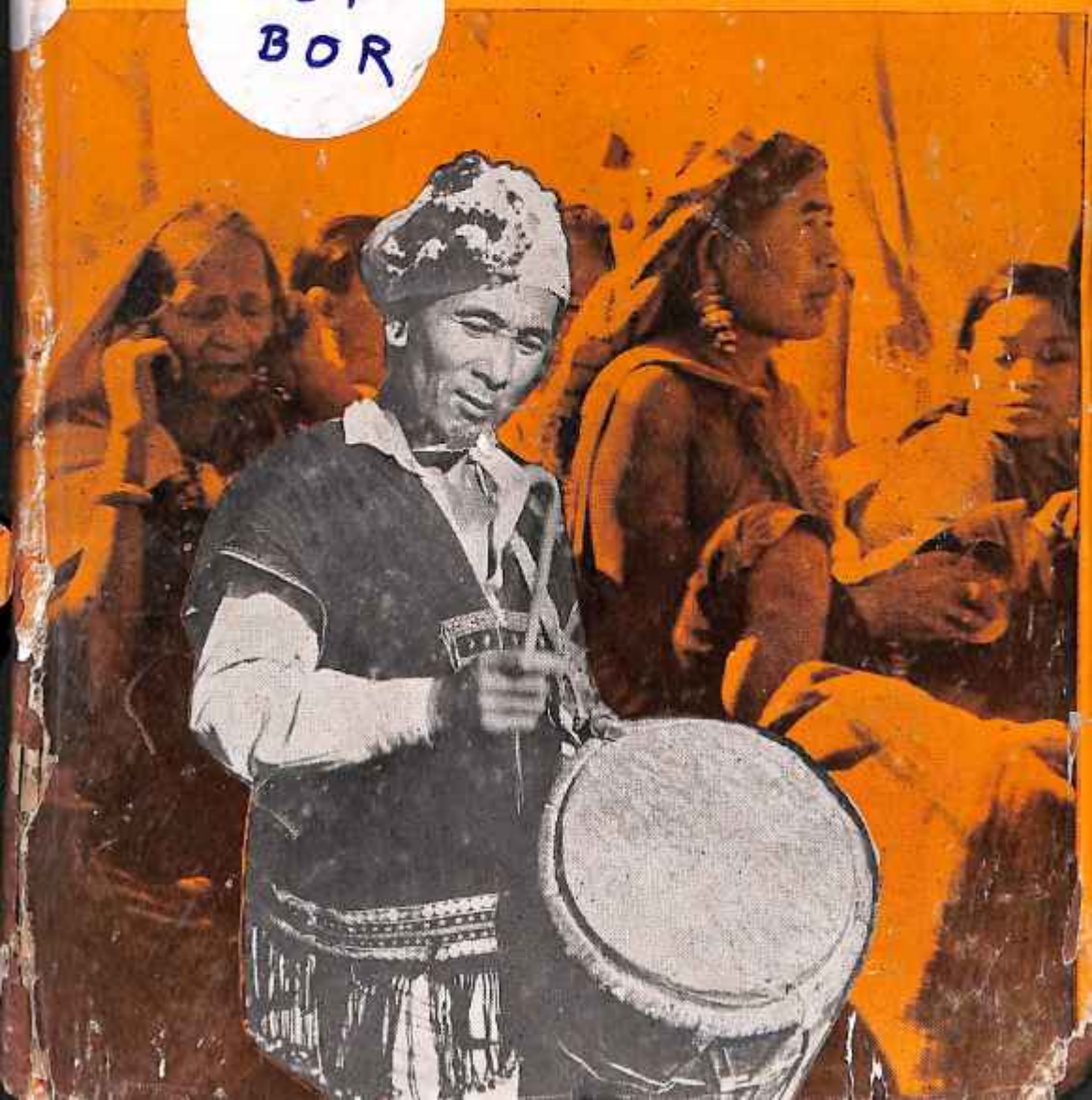


CHOMANGKAN

THE DEATH CEREMONY
PERFORMED BY THE KARBIS

B. N. BORDOLOI

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B. N. BORDOLOI



TRIBAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE, ASSAM.

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PREFACE

The Karbis, who were still recently known as the Mikirs, are a major hill tribe of Assam. They also call themselves Arleng which mean a man. Although they are found to inhabit mainly the Karbi Anglong District of Assam, some scattered Karbi inhabited pockets are found in the North Cachar Hills, Sibsagar, Nowgong and Darrang Districts. Racially the Karbis belong to the Mongoloid group, while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto Burman Group.

Their folklores indicate that during the long past once they used to live on the banks of the rivers the Kalang and the Kapili and the entire Kaziranga area, the famous National Game Sanctuary of Assam, was within their habitation. During the reigns of the Kachari Kings they were driven to the hills and some of them entered into Jaintiapur, the erstwhile Jaintia Kindom and lived under the Jaintia suzerainty.

The Karbis had their own kingdom also adjacent to the Jaintia Kingdom. Socheng and Niz Rongkhang were their capitals. Their traditional king still lives in Niz Rongkhang. Each Karbi village under the erstwhile Karbi kingdom was headed by the village headman called Sarbura. There was an officer called Havai over one Longri constituted with a cluster of contiguous villages. There were altogether 12 such Longris. These 12 Longris were constituted into 4 Artus and each Artu was governed by an officer called Lingdok. Above the four Lingdoks was the king called Recho.

The Karbis have five exogamous clans called Kur. They are Terang, Teron, Enghee, Engti and Timung. Each clan has a number of subclans, viz., Terang-6, Teron-6, Enghee-30, Engti-4 and Timung-30. These clans are exogamous and the marriage between a boy and a girl of the same clan is a taboo. Cross-cousin marriage is a preferential one. Monogamy

is the prevailing rule, although there is no bar to marrying more than one wife. There is no system of bride price among the Karbis. The wife does not change her surname after marriage. Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing rule. In the event of marriage by capture, the marriage has to be regularised later on. Divorce, although permitted under the customary rule, is very rare. Widow remarriage is permissible, but the widow must marry a man belonging to the same clan of her deceased husband.

The Karbis follow the patriarchal system of family structure. All the children belong to the father and assume his title. The line of descent is traced through male members only. At the death of their father, the sons inherit his property and not by daughters. If the deceased leaves no male issues, his property is inherited by his nearest male relative belonging to the same clan, but never by his daughters.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Karbis. They practise shifting cultivation (Jhum). In the plains portions of the Karbi Anglong District, the Karbis now-a-days have resorted to settled cultivation. Cows and buffaloes are reared by them, but they hardly use their milk for consumption purposes. Besides cattle, each family rears pigs and birds. The Karbi women are expert weavers and almost all the clothes required for their domestic use are produced by them in their family looms. Rearing of Endi, spinning of Endi thread and weaving of Endi clothes are common sights in the Karbi villages. Bamboo and cane goods required for day-to-day use are also produced by the Karbis at their leisure time. There are good carpenters and blacksmiths among them.

The Karbis are a colourful tribe with their traditional dresses, ornaments, dances, music and folklores. They are peace loving and prefer to lead a life of content. The village council of elders called 'Me' presided over by the Sarburah or the Gaonbura (village headman) still settles the minor disputes. The bachelors' dormitory and the youth organisation called Resomar still play important roles in Karbi social life.

From the point of view of religion the Karbis can be regarded as animists. Hinduism in its crude form finds manifestation in their worships of gods, goddesses and deities. They believe in one Supreme Being (Arnam Sansar Recho) as the creator of this universe. They also believe in innumerable deities some of which are benevolent and some malevolent. Each disease is associated with a presiding deity. Hemphu and Mukrang are two benevolent household gods. For the appeasement of the deities the Karbis observe many religious rituals where sacrifice of pigs and fowls and use of rice beer are indispensable.

The most elaborate as well as important socio-religious ceremony observed by the Karbis is death ceremony. But unfortunately this has been called Chomangkan which literally means a Khasi dance. In this book an attempt has been made by me to show whether there is any justification in calling this ceremony 'Chomangkan'. The method used by me for collection of data was participant observation. All efforts have been made by me to present the rituals during the four days' observance of this festival in their details and proper perspective.

My thanks are due to Shri M. M. Choudhury, A.C.S., Ex-Director, Tribal Research Institute, Assam and Shri P. C. Mishra, I.A.S., Ex-Secretary, Department for Plains Tribes and Backward Classes, Government of Assam, for taking necessary steps to bring this aspect of the Karbi life to light. I am also thankful to Shri Tahirul Islam, at present, U.D.A. in the Directorate of Tribal Research Institute, Assam, for extending his help in typing the manuscript of the book.

It is hoped that my humble attempt will throw open new avenues for further research into life and culture of the Karbi people.

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Dated Guwahati,
the 31st March 1982

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CHOMANGKAN

The death ceremony observed by the Karbis

The Karbis (Mikirs) believe in the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and rebirth. Their belief, thus, does not differ fundamentally from the mainstream of the Hindu concept of life and death. Like the other Hindus they also perform the funeral ceremony at the time of the cremation of the deceased and the death ceremony at a later date for the eternal peace and well-being of the dead person. The performance of the death ceremony is a must for the Karbis irrespective of social status and economic positions. It shall have to be performed sooner or later according to the convenience of the concerned family taking into consideration the elaborate preparation required and the huge monetary expenditure involved. Therefore, no rigidity in respect of time limit for the celebration of this ceremony has been forced by the society. The date on which this ceremony is to be performed for a dead man entirely depends on the means as well the convenience of the concerned family. In order to minimize the cost, sometimes, death ceremony of a few deceased persons of the same family is observed together. It is to be mentioned here that the observance of the death ceremony for a still-born baby or for a baby who has died before the after-birth has left the mother, is no obligatory.

CONCEPT OF DEATH

Before going into details of the rituals of the death ceremony called Chomangkan observed by the Karbis, it will be worthwhile to examine the Karbi concept of death because of the fact that the most of the rituals observed are based mainly on their concept of death.

The Karbi concept of death depends primarily on three factors, namely, the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and rebirth. The dead, therefore, command as much respect as the living. The Karbis believe that the spirits of the dead have a world of their own and it is known as **Chom-Arong** or **Chum-Arong** or **Yama-Arong** which literally means the city of Yama- the king of death. This **Chom-Arong** or **Chum-Arong** or **Yama-Arong** is supposed to be located on a hill known as **Lang Serve** lying beyond an inaccessible hill called **Mukindan Anglong**. Unless the spirits of the dead men are sanctified with the elaborate rituals of **Chomangkan**, meaning the death ceremony, they do not get admittance to the destined world of the spirits, namely, **Chom-Arong** or **Chum-Arong** or **Yama-Arong**. **Chomangkan** ceremony is, therefore, performed with a view to enabling the roaming spirits of the dead persons to enter into their proper abode. But **Chom-Arong** or **Chum-Arong** or **Yama-Arong** is not a resting place of the souls of the dead for ever. It is simply a temporary resting place and the period of rest varies from spirit to spirit. The Karbis believe that the spirit of a dead man is reborn in the same family. When the rebirth in the same family is not a practicable proposition, the spirit might take its birth in a family belonging to the same clan. That is why, a new born child is very often named after a person of the family whose death took place quite some time ahead of the birth of the child. The reason for repetitions of the same names among the members of the same family may be ascribed to this.

It is believed that in the bygone days there had been only a very thin screen between the dead and the living and the spirits of the dead could pay visits to their relative at their will in the shape of shadows or images called **Arjan**. According to an anecdote prevalent in the Karbi society, this bond of contact was snapped for good owing to the lack of proper mannerism and understanding on the part of a daughter-in-law of a particular family. The anecdote runs as follows:

Death occurred of a very pious old man of a particular family. The spirit of the old man had started paying regular visits to his living wife in the shape of an apparition. It was offered food and drink by his wife at his each visit. The daughter-in-law of the family was too curious to see the apparition form of her dead father-in-law. When she could no longer resist her curiosity, she had decided to have a look at the apparition by any means, fair or foul. With a view to fulfilling her desire, she one day sent her mother-in-law to the **Jhum** (shifting cultivation) and she herself remained at home assuring her mother-in-law that the apparition would be treated as usual with food and drink at the time of his visit to the household. The mother-in-law accordingly left for **Jhum** thinking that her daughter-in-law would be capable of entertaining the spirit of her dead husband in the form of an apparition timely with food and drink. At mid-day the spirit of the father-in-law with a ghostly appearance appeared at the courtyard of the house and enquired whether anybody was in the house. The daughter-in-law came to the door and at the sight of the ghostly appearance of the spirit of her dead father-in-law was frozen with fright. She had never expected the apparition to be of such an awful, ghostly shape. Any way, he demanded serving of food and drink immediately. Although she kept everything ready, she dared not to offer him food and drink out of fright. After waiting sometime for food and drink, he asked for a piece of live firewood for the purpose of smoking. Instead of complying with his request, the daughter-in-law hid herself behind the bamboo wall. But still she could see the apparition through the little holes in the wall. The spirit of the father-in-law, instead of getting angry with the conduct of her daughter-in-law, rather felt pity at her plight and asked her to cover her head with the cooking pot. Following his instructions she hid her face with the cooking pot and this had saved her from seeing the ghostly apparition of her dead father-in-law any more. The spirit, however, being deprived of the usual share of his food and drink had left

the place in disgust never to come back again to pay visit to the living ones. Thenceforth, the living could no longer see the spirits of the dead. It is believed that owing to the fault of the daughter-in-law complete separation had been created between the living and the dead for good.

ETYMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM "CHOMANGKAN"

Strangely enough, Chomangkan which is performed by the Karbis as an elaborate death ceremony and which has practically got nothing to do with the Khasi people, literally means a Khasi dance. The term "Chomang" means the Khasis and the term "Kan" means dance. (The Karbis call the Khasis Chomang). Terming this important ceremony of the Karbis as a Khasi dance must have some inner significance. It is very interesting to note that in the bygone days the Karbis had used the term *Arleng Karhi* to denote the elaborate death ceremony performed by them. The terms *Arleng Karhi* literally mean the death ceremony performed by the Karbis. The term *Arleng* means a man which otherwise refers to a Karbi and the term *Karhi* means the death ceremony. It can, therefore be assumed that the terminology *Arleng Karhi* was replaced by the term *Chomangkan* perhaps during the period when the Karbis were compelled by the circumstances to live in Jaintiapur, the land of the Khasis and the Jaintias.

We may ascribe three probabilities to this changeover—

It is a well-known fact that the Karbis in order to get rid of the oppressions perpetrated by the Kacharis, took refuge in the ancient kingdom of Jaintiapur. One probability is that during their stay in Jaintiapur, there might have been some exchange of culture between these two peoples. The Karbi youths must have learnt a dance (*Kan*) from the Chomangs (the Khasis) and used it during the performance of the dance at the time of observance of the death ceremony called *Arleng Karhi*. This newly learnt dance was perhaps more attractive and vigorous.

And gradually the terminology *Arleng Karhi* had been relegated to oblivion and its place had been occupied by the term *Chomangkan*, the newly learnt dance. It may be pointed out here that the dance called *Nimsokerung* performed by the Karbi youths—both boys and girls—during the observance of *Chomangkan* has some resemblance with the Khasi dance called *Nongkrem*— which may be termed as a dance of embracing.

The second probability, which cannot be ruled out in the absence of any documentary proofs, is that the Karbis might have been compelled to accept and use one of the dances of the Chomangs (the Khasis) while the Karbis were living in Jaintiapur under the subjugation of the Jaintia king. As it was a question of relationship between the rulers and the ruled, the Karbis might have been forced to call their death ceremony *Chomangkan* (The dance of the rulers, namely, the people of Jaintiapur) instead of *Arleng Karhi*.

The third probability refers to the performance of the death ceremony of *Thong Nokbe*, the great Karbi hero whom the Karbis still hold in high esteem. When the Karbis were living in the kingdom of Jaintiapur, *Thong Nokbe*, by virtue of his heroic deeds of outstanding merit, had become the Commander-in-Chief of the king of Jaintiapur. For his extraordinary valour and courage he was liked by the Jaintia king very much. Later on the title "*Nokbe*", which literally means a hero, was bestowed upon him by the king as a recognition of his heroism. *Thong Nokbe* under the patronage of the Jaintia king had gorgeously celebrated the death ceremony of his late father. To this ceremony besides his own people, namely, the Karbis, the Khasis and the Jaintias were also invited. During the celebration of the death ceremony dances were performed by the Karbi troupes as well as the Khasi and the Jaintia troupes. There was, in fact, a kind of competition among these troupes. However, the dances performed by the Chomangs had surpassed the dances performed by the Karbis. It can, therefore, be assumed that the Karbis introduced the

dance (Kan) of the Chomangs in the celebration of the death ceremony perhaps in a modified form making it suitable to their own requirements. The rechristening of the death ceremony observed by the Karbis from Arleng Karhi to Chomangkan might have taken place at this juncture.

Mr. Edward Stack in his book "The Mikirs", dealing on the subject of the place of the Mikirs in the Tibeto-Burman family states that during their sojourn in Khasi land they assimilated much from the Khasis in regard to the funeral ceremonies.¹

Besides the three important probabilities mentioned above we may examine three more probabilities having some factual values.

The Karbis call the land of the dead or the city of the king of death Chom-Arong or Chum-Arong. Some call it Yama-Arong also. The term Chom or Chum or Yama means the king of death and the term Arong means a city. In the bygone days there was every possibility of calling this ceremony Chom-Arong-Kan or Chum-Arong-Kan, the literal meaning being the dances performed in honour of those whose present abode is in the kingdom of Yama, the king of death. From the term Chom-Arong-Kan or Chum-Arong-Kan the two middle letters 'R' and 'O' might have been dropped in course of time, perhaps in those days, when the Karbis were compelled by the circumstances to live in close proximity with the Khasis and the Jaintias (Chomang).

The second probability may be stated as follows :—

The Karbis believe that it was Thireng Vareng, the great social reformer capable of travelling between the land of the dead and the land of the living freely, who had introduced the rules, regulations and manners in which the death ceremony was to be observed. He could visit the land of the dead because of his matrimonial relationship with Yama, the king of death. (It is said that Thireng Vareng married the daughter of Yama). In the land of the dead he had seen how the Kans or A—Kans were performed by the people there and the same

* 1. Stack, E. & Lyall, C. The Mikirs, P. 152.

Kans or A—Kans were introduced by him here among the living at the time of celebration of the death ceremony of the Karbis. Because of the association of the Chom-A-Kans, the death ceremony of the Karbis might have been called Chom-A-Kan. There is every likelihood that the term Chom-A-Kan might have been changed to Chomangkan when the Karbis have been compelled by the circumstances to live as subjects of the Jaintia king. These two terms, namely, Chom-A-Kan and Chomangkan have very little difference from the point of view of pronunciation although their denotations are quite different.

The third probability which is stated below may be regarded as a more realistic one.

To the death ceremony are invited hamlets of big villages and a party from a hamlet attending the death ceremony is called Chomfang in Karbi. Although each Chomfang consists of people of all ages belonging to both sexes, nonetheless, in the dances performed, only the youths-boys as well as girls-participate. Youths from each Chomfang will be called upon to participate in all group dances in turn as per list already fixed up according to the traditional way, giving first priority to the Chomfang to which the family celebrating the death ceremony belongs. In fact the whole Chomangkan celebration may very well be termed as Chomfangkan which literally means group dances of the youths of the parties from hamlets of the different villages. In the bygone days, therefore, there was every possibility of calling the death ceremony (Arleng Karhi) Chomfangkan. When the Karbis came into close contact with the Khasis and the Jaintias (Chomangs) the letter 'F' might have been dropped. So there is every likelihood of Chomfangkan becoming Chomangkan in course of time.

Considering all the factors mentioned above it may be concluded that the most elaborate and highly expensive death ceremony performed by the Karbis continuously for four days is not a mere Khasi dance or Chomangkan.

Although a good number of dances are performed in this ceremony, nevertheless, in comparison with the numerous religious rites performed during the four days, performance of dances

seems to have played a minor role only. Besides, there are no any similarities between the religious rites that are observed by the Karbis on the one hand and by the Khasis and the Jaintias on the other during the celebration of death ceremony. It will not be out of place to mention here that there is a slight difference in the pronounciation of the terms **Chomangkan**, the death ceremony of the Karbis and **Chomang**, the Khasis and the Jaintias. In fact the Karbis call the latter ones **Somang** and not **Chomang**. This difference in pronounciation, which has a great significance has so far been overlooked.

Whatever it may be, to term **Arleng Karhi**, the death ceremony of the Karbis as **Chomangkan** is not only misleading but a real misnomer as well.

It has already been mentioned that **Chomangkan** is the most elaborate important and costly ceremony performed by the Karbis. The numerous ceremonial rites are so elaborate that it takes months together to get them well prepared. Provisions for huge quantity of rice and country liquor have to be made for feeding five hundred to one thousand people at least for four days. Besides sufficient quantities of pig meat, provision has to be made for blank tea also. A camp will have to be erected at an open place for the elderly persons and honoured guests. Village parties called **Chomfang** are to be invited from far and near and they are to be accommodated by constructing small thatched huts. The most important persons whose services are required in the performance of the different rituals are the **Uchepi** and the **Duihudi**. The **Uchepi**, generally an old woman, is a professional weeper capable of singing the songs of lamentations, cooking of **Anjam**, the food specially prepared for the deceased and offering of the same to the departed one. In fact she is considered to be well versed in all the rituals the observance of which is a must. The **Duihudi** is the master drummer who leads the party playing drums in the performance of the death ceremony. It may be mentioned here that for each ritual in the performance of **Chomangkan** there is a separate set of drum beatings. Hence like the **Uchepi** the **Duihudi** also must be well-versed in all the techniques of

Chomangkan and at the same time he must have a very sound knowledge of the different sets of drum beatings required for different rituals. Last of all, special invitation has to be extended to all the maternal uncles of the deceased because of the fact that the maternal uncles have to play very active and prominent roles in the performance of '**Chomangkan**.'

TYPES OF CHOMANGKAN

Three types of **Chomangkan** are found to be prevalent among the Kabris and they are :—1. **Kanphlaphla**, 2. **Langtuk** and 3. **Harne**. From the points of view of importance, size, elaborateness and financial implications the **Harne** tops the list. **Langtuk** is slightly lower than **Harne** and **Kanphlaphla** occupies the lowest place. Means is not the criterion in determining the type of **Chomangkan** that a family is going to observe. The social stratification also plays an important role in this case. In other words, the question of social status has also to be taken into consideration. As for example, **Harne** can be observed only by those families which have a very outstanding social status and who are held in high esteem by the other Karbis. If the concerned family does not belong to the most respectable social status, it cannot observe **Harne** even if it might be very well-to-do from the point of view of economic status. **Langtuk Chomangkan** can be observed by those families who have slightly lower social status than those observing **Harne**. Here also status corabined with means is an important consideration. **Kanphlaphla** is observed by those families who are not entitled to observe either **Harne** or **Langtuk**. In other words **Kanphlaphla Chomangkan** is observed by the common Karbis.

In **Langtuk Chomangkan**, a **Lantguk**, which means a well-(**Lang** means water and **Tuk** means a pit) is dug outside the village boundary. The well, dug for the occasion, is a square one-each side having ten to fifteen feet and its depth is about ten feet. The perimeter at the bottom is about half that of the surface. Provision for a few stairs

leading to the bottom of the Langtuk has also to be made. The bust of the deceased for whom the particular Chomangkan is observed is erected in front of the Langtuk. This bust is called Long-e. If the death ceremony of a few persons is observed together busts of all them are to be erected in front of the Langtuk. The busts are either carved out of big pieces of stone or made of cement concrete. A flat stone called Long-Pat or a concrete slab is to be placed before the bust for keeping offerings. The Langtuk is donated to the deceased so that in the other world he may use as much water as he needs. Besides men, the water of the Langtuk will be drunk by numerous birds and animals. Blessings due to the donor for satisfying the thirsts of so many souls will automatically go to the spirit of the deceased also.

In Harne also the Lakgtuk (the newly dug well) is a must. But the main difference between the Langtuk Chomangkan and the Harne Chomangkan lies in the fact that while in the former only a single Jambeli Athon is used just near the flat stone or the concrete slab placed near the bust for offering food, drink and other articles, in case of the latter five Jambeli Athons are used. One is fixed near the flat stone or the concrete slab and the other four are fixed at the corners of the Langtuk one at each corner. (The Jambeli Athon is a decorated wooden post with wooden birds on its branches. It is a very valuable article in the Karbi society which commands great respect. Its details will be given at an appropriate place). In the celebration of Langtuk Chomangkan instead of Jambeli Athons only bamboos are used at the four corners of the Langtuk (well). The use of the four extra Jambeli Athons in Harne clearly points out the social distinction and respect the deceased had enjoyed while he or she was alive and has been enjoying even at the time of observing the death ceremony.

Prior to the actual performance of the death ceremony some important works are to be completed. These works include the construction of the Banjar, the making of Son-Che-Boche, Bipan-Bijan, and Peso-Riso, the digging of

the well (Langtuk) carving the bust out of the piece of stone or making the bust of the deceased with cement concrete in case of Harne Chomangkan or Langtuk Chomangkan and the construction of the gate with the word Kardom (welcome).

The Banjar will have to be constructed one week's before the commencement of the actual death ceremony. The Banjar is a thick bamboo post about seven feet in height smoothed and ornamented with curled shavings, called BU in Karbi, from top to bottom. At the top of the post are inserted a bunch of green leaves-(the leaves become completely dry at the time of the observance of the actual Chomangkan) and three bamboo sticks projecting on three sides. In these sticks small flags, small baskets made of split bamboos and other articles are hung. Six shorter pieces of bamboo, each measuring about four feet in length with curled ornamentation from top to bottom and with bunches of green leaves at the top are also fixed around the Banjar post. These posts are called Seroso. One Banjar post with six pieces of Seroso represents the death ceremony of one person. If the death ceremony of a few persons belonging to the same family is proposed to be performed together, the number of Banjar post and the Seroso is to be multiplied accordingly. By the side of the Banjar a few bundles of ornamental bamboo sticks, each measuring about two feet in length are kept on the ground. These sticks are used later on in the group dance called Banjar Kekan. The manner in which the Banjar post and the Seroso is used will be described in detail at appropriate places.

It has already been mentioned that the Karbis believe in life hereafter. Besides food and drink, the deceased, therefore, must be provided with everything whatever he used while he was alive. Prototype tools and implements called Son-Che-Boche, articles of day to day use called Bipan-Bijan and dresses and clothes called Peso-Riso must be kept ready for offering them to the deceased at the place of observance of the death ceremony and at the cremation ground so that the deceased might use them in the other world. If the deceased is a male, a wooden shield (Chong-Kechangnan) and

a wooden sword (Nok) will have also to be offered so that he might fight against the evils in the other world.

It would be worthwhile to mention here that in the death ceremony all the rituals that were observed by the Karbis at the cremation ceremony will have to be repeated in details over and above the observance of many other rituals.

RUH KEHUM

The celebration of Chomangkan begins with the performance of the ceremony called Ruh Kehum which means the bringing back of the soul from the cremation ground to the house of the deceased. It is performed on the first day. In the late morning a procession of the family members and relatives of the deceased and other villagers accompanied by the Uchepi starts from the house of the deceased to the cremation ground called Tipit in Karbi. The procession is led by two pairs of drummers headed by Duihudi, the master drummer. Just before starting the Uchepi with the words of lamentation invokes the spirit of the deceased to come to life on this particular occasion. The Uchepi also carries the specially prepared food called Anjam to be offered to the deceased at the cremation ground. Sometimes Anjam is prepared by the Uchepi at the cremation ground itself instead of carrying it (Anjam) after being prepared at home. The master drummer called Duihudi, is quite well versed on the different sets of notations of drum-beatings used on different occasions. These sets of notations vary in intensity as well as in rhythm. Drum beatings meant for merry making cannot be used in lamentation. Similarly drum beatings meant for scaring away evil spirits cannot be used for invoking the spirit of a dead man. In fact the drum beatings at a particular point of time and place clearly indicate the ceremony that is being performed. The master drummer, Duihudi, therefore, has to impart training to the drummers for about a month prior to the celebration of the death ceremony. The first beating, of course, will have to be given by Duihudi in his drum on all occasions which will be followed by other drummers. Anyway, the drum beatings on the occasion of the procession to

the cremation ground, are quite grave and rhythmic. After the arrival of the procession at the Tipit, the cremation ground, a crowie is inserted into the ground where the deceased was cremated after his death by digging a small hole¹. This crowie represents the soul of the deceased. As soon as the drum beatings are changed the ceremonial sacrifice will begin. At first an egg is split into three parts and each split part is thrown into a separate place. It is followed by the sacrifice of a small chicken preferably seven days old. After a while a male member of the family of the deceased tries to dig out the crowie with a long Dao. Along with drum beatings he moves the Dao up and down several times by holding it in his right hand. He is called Tirikam in Karbi which literally means a person performing a particular job assigned to him. Simultaneously an old woman belonging to the clan of the deceased moves a spreading piece of black scarf up and down along with the movements of the Dao of Tirikam keeping perfect rhythm with the drum beatings. The old woman moves the black scarf with a view to receiving the crowie when it is dug out by Tirikam. When the drum beatings indicate that the crowie representing the soul of the deceased should be taken out, Tirikam with his Dao digs out the crowie and places it on the spread scarf held by the old woman. The crowie is then tied up with a knot of the scarf and is placed on the ground for the purpose of offering Anjam, the food specially prepared by the Uchepi. As soon as the crowie is placed on the scarf, the drum beatings will also be stopped. Anjam includes Horlang (rice-beer), betel nuts and betel leaves. A few plantain leaves are spread on the ground before the black scarf in which the crowie is tied up. The Uchepi

¹ In fact a piece of bone is buried at the cremation ground after the body is consumed by the fire and this piece of bone has to be dug out during the performance of the ceremony called Ruh Kehum. But the piece of bone already buried becomes untraceable due to time gap between cremation and the observance of the death ceremony. Hence a crowie is used to make the matter easy.



then places the *Anjam* on these leaves. The other relatives of the deceased present there also offer *Horlang*, betel-nuts and leaves to the deceased near the *Anjam*. This is called *Banta* in Karbi. Some of the relatives might offer cash money also along with the offering of *Banta*.

When the ceremonial offering of *Anjam* is completed two Karbi youths in their traditional dresses start dancing with shields and swords in hands around the *Anjam* several rounds in the accompaniment of drum beatings. At the beginning, the movements of the dances are quite slow but gradually their movements become quicker and at the end the rhythms become very quick. It may be mentioned here that no dance can be performed later on if the first dance at the *Tipit* (Cremation ground) is not performed after the offering of the *Anjam*.

Throughout the whole process the *Uchepi* will be weeping by singing a very melancholy song. The tune of this song is so pathetic that it would bring tears to the eyes of those who even do not know the A.B.C.D. of Karbi language. The gist of the song sung by the *Uchepi* is as follows:—"O Oh! the spirit of so and so-we are offering you food and drink specially prepared for this occasion. We are honouring you with a dance also. Please come to the world of the living and live with us."

Along with the completion of the dance performed by the two youths around the *Anjam*, the function at the cremation ground comes to an end.

The party will return home in a procession led by the drummers and the drum beatings will indicate that the party carrying the soul is returning home. The crowrie representing the soul, must be carried by a woman belonging to the mother's clan of the deceased. The party arriving at the village gate will halt near the *Banjar*. *Hongthor*, the resting place of the soul after its comeback from the land of the dead, is considered to be lying near about the *Banjar* site. Here also *Anjam* on plantain leaves has to be offered to the deceased with *Horlang*, betel-nuts and betel-leaves. The two youths performing dance at the *Tipit*

will perform a dance here also with shields and swords in their hands. In the accompaniment of the drum beatings they will dance three rounds around the *Banjar* and by this time the offering of the *Anjam* to the deceased will have to be completed. Here also the *Uchepi* will continue to sing the song of lamentation.

At *Hongthor* near the *Banjar* an important ceremony called *Nodak Alang Tuk* has to be performed if the *Chomangkan* is being celebrated for a woman whose ear-lobe was snapped while she was alive. It is believed by the Karbis that the spirit of such a woman will completely be deprived of having water in the other world unless this ceremony called *Nodak Alang Tuk* is performed here on the first day of the *Chomangkan*. This ceremony consists of sacrificing a small chicken and digging of a small pit like a miniature *Langtuk* (well) representing water.

At *Hongthor* a handful of *Chira* (flattened rice) is given to everybody as a token of gratitude for accompanying the family members to the cremation ground with a view to bringing the soul of the deceased. *Chira*, thus distributed, is to be taken immediately.

The procession led by the woman carrying the crowrie representing the soul of the deceased and the drummers starts again from *Hongthor* and arrives home. Immediately after arriving the crowrie representing the soul of the deceased is inserted into the belly of the straw effigy already prepared for this purpose and the deceased is supposed to be alive now. A few moments later the person in the form of the effigy with the crowrie inside is supposed to be seriously ill. Offerings will be made to the deities for the immediate cure of the person. A group of old men and women will put their heads together to find out the cause of sickness and also the means of curing it. But alas, their efforts are unfruitful. The person dies again for the second time. (First time—the actual death and the second time—the feigned death). Henceforth all the rituals that were observed from the actual death to the completion of funeral shall have to be repeated in toto. At the feigned death, the *Uchepi* starts lamenting again.

ADAMACHAR

It is very interesting to note here the case of a dead man or woman for whom the Chomangkan is being celebrated but who had not undergone the customary marriage. A fake marriage shall have to be arranged just after the insertion of the crowrie representing the soul of the deceased into the belly of the straw effigy. The arrangement of such a fake marriage is called *Piso Pangri*. If the deceased woman did not enter into a formal marriage, a group of women will go to a nearby village and return after a while in a very agitating mood. On their arrival the members of the group will face a volley of questions from the elders of the household examples of which are given below:—

Question—Where is the bride ?

Answer—We are not in a position to bring her here for the marriage.

Question—What stands in the way ?

Answer—She is suffering from a serious disease.

Question—Is there any hope for her life ?

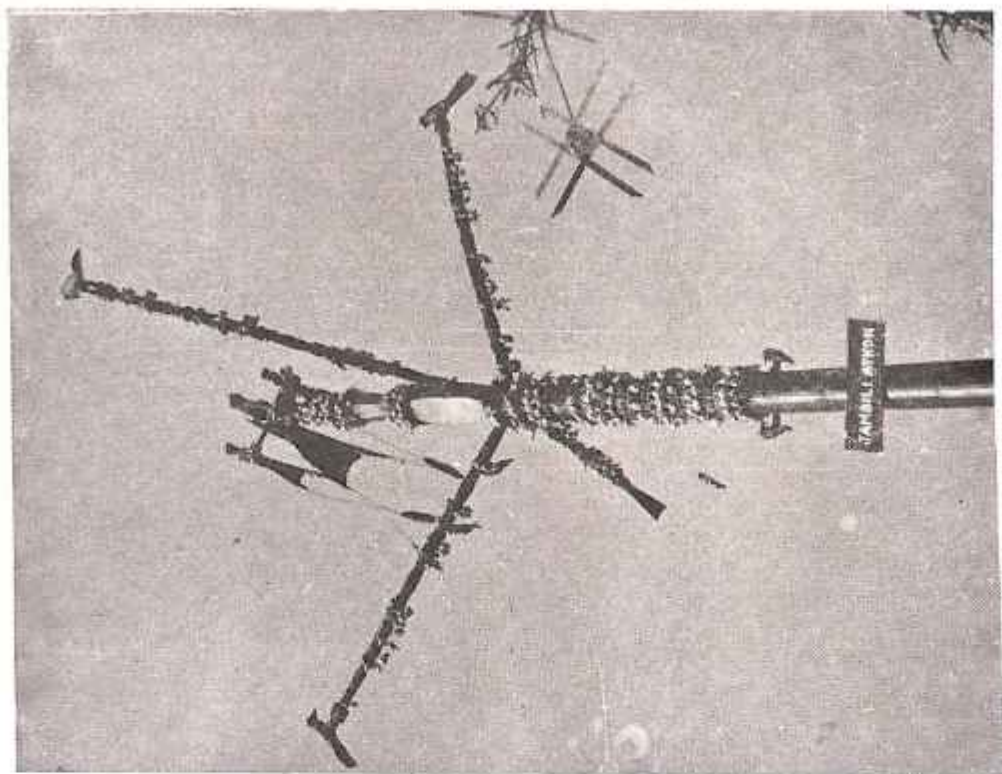
Answer—No, there is none.

Just at the close of the conversation the eldest maternal uncle (*Ong Nihu*) of the deceased woman arriving hurriedly will inform the gathering that his niece (*Philipi*) has just breathed her last. In the absence of the *Ong Nihu*, any one of his brothers or any one of the maternal uncles belonging to the same *Kur* (Clan) shall have to do this job.

Any way, a fake marriage will now be solemnized with the straw effigy of the deceased woman by declaring with couple (the deceased woman represented by the straw effigy and her husband) as husband and wife formally and publicly. The fake marriage thus solemnized is called *Adama-Chomangkan* celebrated for a dead man who did not undergo the traditional marriage formalities while he was alive.



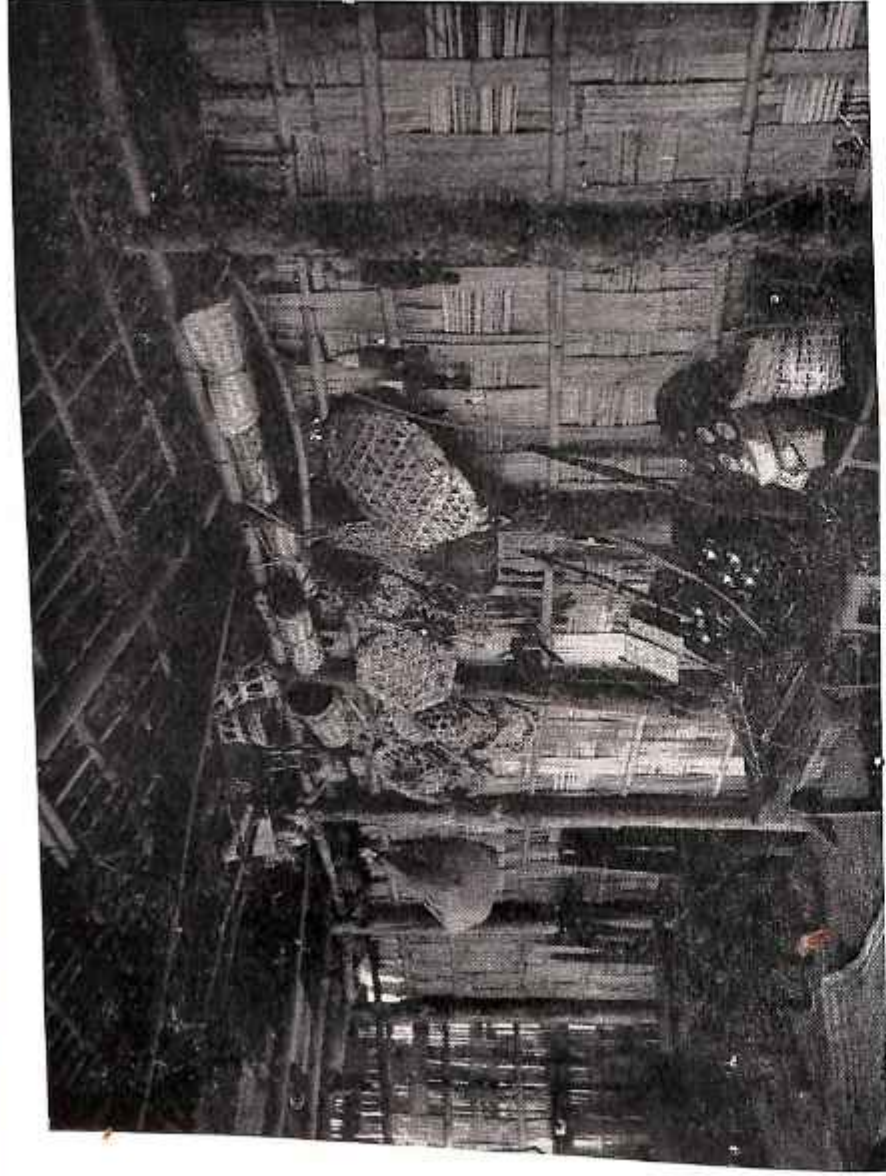
DUIHUDI—the Master Drummer with his assistant called Duhujang.



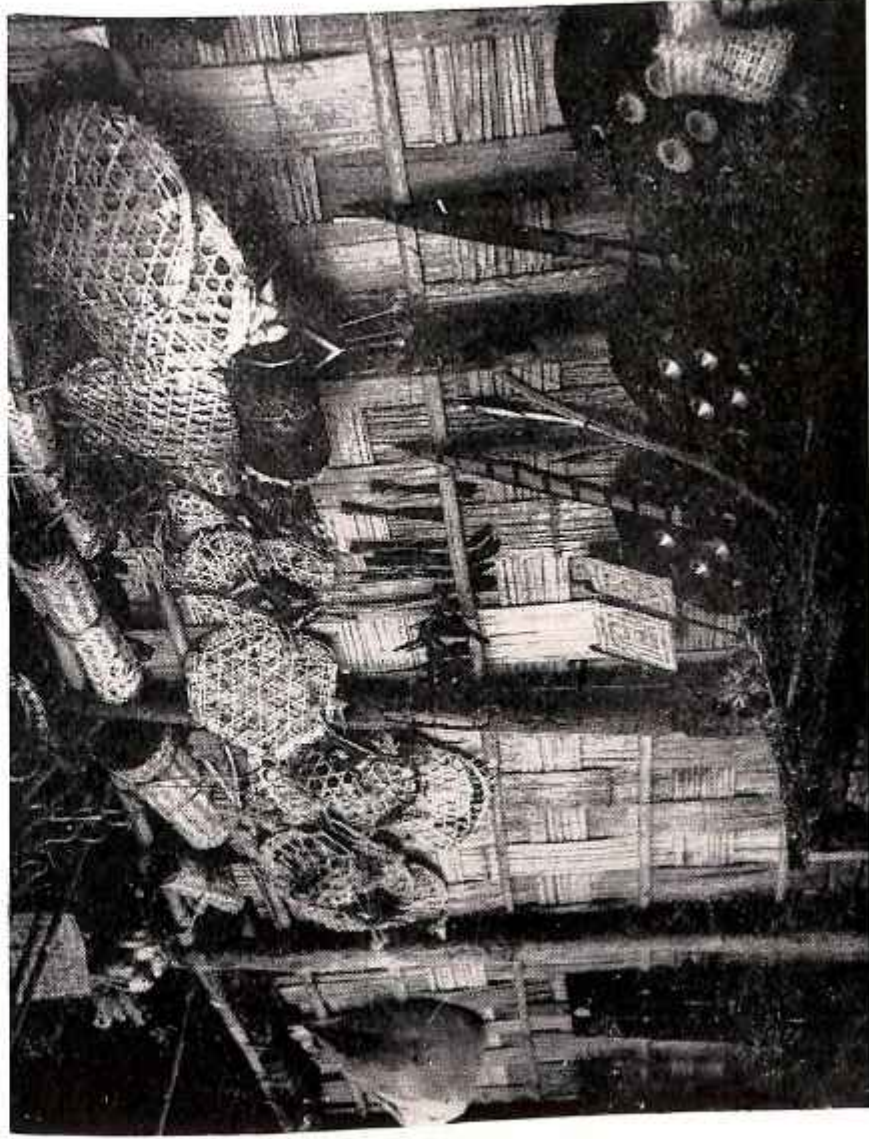
A view of the JAMBELI ATTHON



UCHHEPI—the Professional Weeper and Singer.



A view of the SONCHE—BOCHE—prototype tools and implements and BIPAN—BIJAN—articles of day to day use kept ready to be offered to the deceased.



A close view of SONCHE—BOCHE and BIPAN BIJAN. CHONG—KECHANGNAN (wooden shield) and NOK (wooden sword) are also seen at the bottom of the picture.



UCHEPI, second from the left, singing the song of sorrow in the cremation ground amidst a large gathering prior to the digging of the charred bone (Souli) represented by a crow.



TIRIKAM handing over the charred bone (souli) of the deceased here represented by a crow to an old woman belonging to the clan of the deceased.



Offering of ANJAM (specially prepared food) to the deceased in the cremation ground after digging out the charred bone (soul) represented by a crowrie. Sad looks of the two old women

The straw effigy representing the deceased is now given a bath with warm water and clad with a specially prepared new dress by an old woman. It is then laid in the inner room of the house on a bamboo mat and a sheet of white cloth is spread over the effigy from head to foot. Near the head a fan made of split bamboo is placed. The fan is given to the deceased so that his or her spirit can cool itself in its final journey to the other world whenever occasions demand. Besides the fan four Mithongrangs—two on the head and the other two at the foot of the effigy—are placed. Mithongrang is a kind of article woven with white, red and black threads into a square measuring about 10 cm. in one side in two crosswise bamboo sticks tied at the centre. While the Mithongrangs placed on the head represent the front doors, those placed at the foot represent the back doors of the earthly and heavenly abodes of the deceased.

The Uchepi after taking meals will prepare Anjam again and offer it to the deceased with Horlang, betelnuts and betel-leaves. After the offering of Anjam she will start lamenting again. This time she will speak about the good qualities of the deceased describing in detail his or her place in the neighbouring society, his or her traits or her place in the neighbourhood, his or her traits like honesty, integrity, workman-ship, etc. The Uchepi through her song of lamentation expresses the sentiments of the family members, relatives and neighbours in missing a person having so many qualities. In fact, ill lucks had brought misfortune for them and inspite of their best efforts the life of the person concerned could not be saved. Now the Uchepi expects that the spirit of the dead person will find its proper place in the Yama-Arong, the city of the king of death. It can be mentioned here that the Uchepi has the outstanding capacity of singing the songs of lamentation for hours together stopping only occasionally for a few moments' rest.

KAPA-ER

But the most interesting and at the same time the most embarrassing thing that can be observed in the celebration of

the Chomangkan is the singing of the song called Kapa-er in Karbi. This song is full of the most obscene words that can be uttered by a human being. It is sung by a group of young boys while dancing in perfect rhythm during the first three days of the Chomangkan. The youths will start singing Kapa-er on the first day of the Chomangkan when the offering of Anjam to the deceased in the inner room of the house is over. It may be sung even when the Uchepi might be continuing her lamentation,

It is really most surprising how Kapa-er is allowed to be sung on an occasion of bereavement and at the same time observance of so many holy and religious rites for the eternal peace of the departed soul. The words with which this song is composed are so indecent that under normal circumstances they can never be permitted to utter. The Karbi society, in fact, is not at all accustomed to these words as it is not a permissive society and the utterance of such obscene words under normal circumstances might lead to consequences of very grave nature. The Karbis being strictly exogamous are very much conscious of the clans to which they belong. For there are certain groups of people having avoiding relationship and loose talks among these groups are totally prohibited. It is, therefore, only on this occasion that unrestricted freedom is granted to the young boys for uttering the most obscene words through the singing of the song Kapa-er.

The pertinent questions that may arise here in regard to the singing of Kapa-er during the celebration of the Chomangkan with purity of body and mind are arranged below:—

1. Whether the singing of Kapa-er is as old as that of the Chomangkan ?
2. Was it borrowed by the Karbis from the Khasis and the Jaintias at a later date ?

Regarding the first question it may be mentioned here that the Karbis believe Thireng Vareng, the great social reformer, to be the formulator of all the rules and regulations that govern the Karbi Society even to-day. As

such all the rules and regulations that are observed and all the religious rites that are performed at the time of the Chomangkan were also formulated by him. Thi-Reng literally means dead-alive and Va-Reng literally means come-alive. It is believed that this great social reformer could travel between the worlds of the dead and the living at his sweet will and that is why, he was called Thireng-Vareng. He was supposed to have married the daughter of Yama, the king of death and by virtue of his relationship with Yama he was given the passport to travel between the two worlds, namely, the world of the living and the world of the dead, at any time and without any restrictions whatsoever. In the kingdom of Yama he saw for himself the difficulties faced by the spirits of the dead people and in order to mitigate their sufferings he taught the Karbis the manners in which the death ceremonies of the deceased persons were to be performed so that their souls might rest in peace in the abode of Yama. Thus he solved the question of the segregation of the dead from the living once for all. The preparation for the celebration of the Chomangkan is so elaborate that without the help of the village Risomar (youth club) the family concerned can do nothing. The observance of the Chomangkan is, in fact, an occasion for expressing sorrow at the demise of the near and dear ones. Unless there are some special attractions the boys of the Risomar might not like to participate in the observance of the Chomangkan. It may, therefore, be assumed that Thireng Vareng introduced the singing of Kapa-er with a view to provoking them to participate in all the activities connected with observance of the death ceremony with glee.

Another important fact that is to be mentioned here is that in the Chom-Arong or Yam-Arong every thing is quite reverse and different. During his frequent visits Thireng Vareng found that a crab became a tiger there. The Shehang (a kind of giant lizard) became a king there. A butterfly had turned into an elephant. In the kingdom of Yama he found people going out for fishing but instead

of catching fish, they caught sticks. Thus what seems to be bad here will be considered good in the Chom Arong. The singing of Kapa-er, though seems to be quite obscene here will, therefore, be considered quite good by the residents of the king of Yama including the deceased for whose benefit the death ceremony is being performed. Similarly, she-goats, hens, cocks, pigs, ducks, pigeons, etc., are sacrificed here by severing their head so that the deceased might get them alive in the other world. These factors clearly indicate that the singing of the obscene song Kapa-er is as old as that of the observance of the death ceremony.

In regard to the origin of the Chomangkan an anecdote has been found to be prevalent among the Karbis inhabiting the plains of Assam. This anecdote runs as follows:—

In ancient times there was a very expert hunter among the Karbis belonging to Tumung Chomar. It was rather a habit for him to go out for hunting every day with a pack of hunting dogs. One day in course of his hunting he found a female Shehang (a kind of big edible lizard found in the forest.) With the help of his dogs he caught hold of the Shehang and when he tried to kill her, the Shehang prayed for her life. In lieu of her life, she promised to take the hunter to the abode of the dead. The hunter granted her payer and the Shehang took him to the kingdom of Yama alive and there he learnt all the rules and regulations that were to be observed in the performance of the death ceremony.

Returning back to the world of the living, he taught the Karbis the rules and regulations and all the religious rites that were to be solemnly observed in the performance of the death ceremony.

The point of similarity that we observe in the two stories narrated above is that in both cases the rules and regulations governing the celebration of the Chomangkan are taught to the Karbis by a Karbi whatever might be his name, after returning from the land of the dead or kingdom of Yama.

The Karbis inhabiting the plains of Assam believe that the songs and dance used in the celebration of the Chomangkan are purely of their own and these have not been borrowed from any neighbouring society either tribal or non tribal. If that is so, singing of the obscene song Kapa-er may be regarded as old as that of the Chomangkan.

Prior to the examining of the second question it will be worthwhile to quote here a few lines of the song Kapa-er so that we can have an idea of the intensity or the degree of obscenity displayed in presence of parents, brothers, sisters and elderly people of both sexes. English rendering of each stanza is given within the bracket.

1. "Wang non akarjang atum atum
Wang non lopindong arum arum
Nangthang po chomang kerung kerung"
(Oh you young maidens! Please come, Come under the yonder bush. There I shall teach you all about the sexual acts.)
2. "Nangketham hini adak lahenkedomak
Ne sasaipen serdak arjo hoi hoi mak mak."
(I shall cause damage to your private part located in between your two thighs by thrusting my organ—
Oh! your private part!)
3. "Kaipan tum longle amak nangmok
Lekoipan nangtok
Ketom adim pabrfrov
Api-apo setheklok
Bapkansang kechektinkok."

(With my organ I shall hit your breasts, which I have not been able to fondle yet, with such a force that it will leave a scar. When your parents will see the scar, they will think it to be a mark caused by the touching of the Sorat plant)

N. B. Sorat plant is known as Devil Little the leaves of which cause itching sensation to human body when contacted with skin. Its botanical name is Coportia.

4. "Kaipan dek longle amak
Sansai fokfe pan
Serdak arjo hoi hoi mak"

(I shall cause damage to your private part, which has so far not experienced any sexual intercourse, by inserting my organ covered with a soft skin too deep.—Oh! your private part.)

5. "Toove nefarlo mak dek dek
Kedak adim ha naksek naksek
Akarnuk pasun serek serek
Arung arai pasong lek lek
Kesarali thero mak dek dek
Arjo hoi hoi mak"

(In my dream last night I had a sexual intercourse with you in the corner of your house. But I had not inserted my organ too deep and kept it at the opening of your private part just like a male monkey trying to have sexual intercourse with a female monkey for the first time and I fell asleep in that manner—Oh! your private part.)

6. "Chomagpi amakta mak
Arlengpi amakta mak
Arkike puthak thak
Adirikedo amak
Nangmak kengtipan nangsak"

(There is no difference between the private parts of Khasi girls and Karbi girls and the same kind of pleasure can be obtained from them at the time of sexual intercourse. I shall trample on your itching private part with my toe.)

Now the very reference to the Khasi girls (Chomagpi) in the obscene song Kapa-er points out to the fact that the singing of this song in the performance of the death ceremony of the Karbis has some direct relationship with the Chomongs (Khasis).

But at the same time we shall have to remember that the funeral ceremonies performed by the Karbis and the funeral ceremonies performed by the Khasis and the Jaintias

are not similar to those performed by the Karbis. (A detailed discussion on this point shall be taken up at the end.) In the funeral and death ceremonies observed by the Khasis and the Jaintias singing of any obscene song like that of Kapa-er nowhere takes place. This clearly points out to the fact that the singing of the obscene song Kapa-er has not been borrowed by the Karbis from the Chomangs (Khasis).

The singing of the obscene song Kapa-er, therefore, appears to be as old as the funeral ceremony itself. But the question as to why a reference has been made to Chomanpi (Khasi maidens) in Kapa-er has still to be answered. It may be mentioned here that the obscene song Kapa-er consists of many many stanzas or pieces. The song as sung to-day might not have been composed in toto at a particular point of time. To the original skeleton different stanzas or pieces might have been added at different times and on different occasions by the Karbi poets. The pieces in which there has been a reference to the Khasi maidens might have been composed during the period when the Karbis had been compelled by the circumstances to live in close proximity politically, economically and culturally with the Khasis and the Jaintias.

From the above discussions we may now come to the conclusion that the singing of the obscene song Kapa-er in the death ceremonies observed by the Karbis is not a newcomer and it does not have anything to do with the Chomangs (Khasis). Any way we shall close the discussion on Kapa-er here and pass on to other things.

At night also the Uchepi will prepare special Anjam for the deceased and offer it with Horlang, betel-nut and betel leaves. After offering of Anjam she will again start lamenting till midnight.

RITUALS OF SECOND DAY

The second day of the Chomangkan may be regarded as a day of rest there being no major activities. On this day in the Theri or Tipit (cremation ground) a funeral

pyre called **Methur Hem Kim** or **Theri Hem Kim** will have to be constructed for cremating the effigy or effigies of the deceased in the early hours of the fourth day. It is a platform (**Machang**) typed pyre prepared with dry pieces of logs. The platform is constructed with flattened bamboos. Pieces of dry logs are piled up below the platform.

Besides the funeral pyre a miniature farm house or field house called **Manduso** is to be constructed in a corner of the cremation ground. All around the **Manduso** there will be a fencing with two gates one in front and the other at the back. Out of the four **Mithonrangs** already given to the deceased two will be taken out and one will be placed in each of the two gates of the **Manduso**. A flat stone is kept just outside the front gate. It is supposed that the deceased will carry this miniature farm house called **Manduso** to the other world. At the rear of **Manduso** prototype agricultural implements called **Farlonge** are kept in a row. These are also supposed to be carried by the deceased to the other world. In the other world, meaning the kingdom of death, the deceased will use the farm house and the implements in cultivation. It shows clearly that in the **Yama-Arong** the spirit of the deceased cannot sit tight. It will have to work there also. The **Karbis** believe that when the deceased will be reborn these worldly possessions will not forsake his or her company.

On this day also **Uchepi's** song of lamentation will continue with occasional interruptions for those moments only when she will have to prepare **Anjam** and offer it to the deceased. Singing of **Kapa-er** by the young boys with dancing will also be continued.

KANSO PADU

This day of **Chomangkan**, that is, the second day, is the day for **Kanso Pado** which literally means the last little dances (**Kan** means dance, **So** means small and **Pado** means last). At night the youths perform those simple little dances which cannot be performed next day. It is,

therefore, the last day for the performance of the little dances. It may be mentioned here that in this second evening a hen is to be sacrificed in honour of the **Risomar** (the boys' club). This sacrifice in honour of the **Risomar** is, in fact, an invitation to the youths to participate in dance to be performed subsequently. This ceremony of sacrificing a hen is called **Chomangkan Kekanpi Awopi**.

The close relatives who might be staying quite far away should also arrive on the second day positively.

In the observance of the death ceremony the third day is the most important day. In the morning male relatives of the deceased will go to a bamboo field accompanied by the **Duihudi**, the master drummer and his assistant for cutting five number of bamboos to be fixed at the **Langtuk** (the well)—one at the centre and one each at four corners. The bamboos can only be cut by the male members belonging to the family of the father-in-law of the deceased or his or her **Kur** (clan). The bamboos are cut one after another in the accompaniment of drum beatings. All the male members belonging to the family of the father-in-law of the deceased or his or her clan present there will raise their **Daos** up at the first beating of the drums and will lower their **Daos** at the second beating of the drums. During the second beatings of the drums the particular person who is assigned the job of cutting the first bamboo will give the first stroke at the bottom of the bamboo while the others will only affect cutting and will not touch the bamboo with their **Daos**. The drum beatings will continue till the final **Dao** stroke. When the bamboo is finally cut, the dragging of the bamboo will take place again in the accompaniment of drum beatings. In the dragging also all persons present participate. In each beating, the bamboo is dragged only about a foot. When the drum beating will announce its last stroke, the bamboo is finally dragged out from among the other standing bamboos. The other four bamboos are also cut and dragged out in the same manner. The only difference is that the five bamboos are cut by five different persons. For cutting and dragging out of five bamboos it takes about an hour altogether. The bamboos with

their branches and leaves are then taken home and placed in the front courtyard of the house. Later on the bamboos are taken to the ground, where the actual death ceremony is observed, in a procession.

Prior to the ceremonial cutting of the bamboos a hen is to be sacrificed in the name of the deceased in honour of the Risomar inviting its member meaning the young boys to participate in the dances to be performed later on.

Before noon the procession called Rongketon is taken out from the house of the deceased and led to the place where the Langtuk is dug and the ceremonial rites are to be performed. The youth carrying the Jambeli Athon leads the procession. He is followed by the Duihudi (the master drummer) his assistant and the other drummers, the dancing youths, the youths carrying the bamboos, the family members of the deceased, relatives and the guests. The processionists have to walk three rounds in the courtyard of the house of the deceased prior to their going to the Chomangkan ground. The procession in accompaniment of drum beatings arrives at the Chomangkan ground at a very slow pace and goes round the Langtuk thrice and then stops.

Now it will be worthwhile here to give a description of the Jambeli Athon which is indispensable in the celebration of the death ceremony observed by the Karbis. The Jambeli Athon is a wooden post about 2½ metres in height decorated with silver plates and crowries. At a point about a metre below from the top, four small wooden sticks measuring about 80 cm. each are fixed in such away that each stick makes an angle of 45° to the main post. While the main post is called Athon the four smaller sticks are called Jambeli. At the top of the Athon is fixed a hornbill (Wojaroo) carved out of a piece of wood. The Wojaroo (hornbill) is regarded by the Karbis as the king of birds. There stand two tiny wooden birds by the side of the Wojaroo. It may also be mentioned here that the tail of the hornbill is used by a Karbi young boy in decorating his hairknot. At the top of each of the four small branches there stands a small bird called Wofreli in Karbi carved out of a piece of wood. The Wofreli is a

kind of wild sparrow. The four Wofreli are regarded as the ministers of the Wojaroo and the two tiny birds standing by its side are regarded as its bodyguards and servants as well. It has already been mentioned that the Jambeli Athon is an article of high honour and prestige. It cannot be used in all occasions. Only in befitting occasions like the observance of death ceremony it can be used. Moreover, each and every Karbi village cannot have a Jambeli Athon. The Jambeli Athon can be kept by a village which complies with certain minimum norms of ceremonial rites. Within a certain limit, therefore, there cannot be more than one Jambeli Athon. After its use on a particular occasion it is carefully kept in the ceiling of a house after wrapping it up with a piece of fine cloth.

Prior to the starting of the procession of Rongketon the statue of the deceased person already erected in front of the Langtuk is to be fully dressed with new clothes. Tools, implements and household articles used by the deceased while he or she was alive are also to be kept near the statue in rows. Besides these, wheels of red, black and white threads called Honmai and a water pot called Langdung are also given to the deceased.

The old women accompanying the procession of Rongketon take their seats in front of the deceased with Horlang, betel-nuts and betel leaves. The other women assembled there also offer Horlang, betel nut and betel leaves. When this formality of offering Anjam is completed a song of lamentation called Kacharhe Abang is sung either by the Uchepi or by any other old woman present there who is well-versed in this subject. This song is like a chant describing the life of the deceased person, whither he or she is going on leaving this earth for good, the manner in which he or she will have to cross the inaccessible hill called Mukindon and other hazards, how the spirit will see his or her dead relatives and the message that is being carried by the spirit to them.

While the singing of the Kacharhe Abang goes on at full swing, steps are taken by the members of the Risomar and

other elderly male persons to fix the bamboos which are already brought there in the *Langtuk*. The tallest bamboo is fixed at the centre of the *Langtuk* and this bamboo is called *Pirsikpi*. The other four bamboos called *Pirsikso* are fixed one at each corner of the *Langtuk* and then these are tied to the bamboo at the centre at an angle of about 40° with the surface. If the death ceremony is celebrated for more than one person, for each of them an additional pair of *Pirsikpi* and *Pirsikso* has to be used.

The underlying purpose behind the fixing of the bamboos in the *Langtuk* is to offer a bamboo garden to the deceased for his or her use in the other world. Similarly, the *Langtuk* is also offered to the deceased so that he or she might get good drinking water in the other world. The spirit may also use the *Langtuk* in the other world for the purpose of fishing. At the time of fixing the *Pirsikpi* and *Pirsikso*, gifts in cash or kind called *Tipul* have to be offered by throwing them to the bottom of the *Langtuk*. Pieces of red and white cloths are hung at the top of the *Pirsikpi* and *Pirsikso*. These pieces of cloths are visible from a long distance and they signify the fact the death ceremony of so and so is being observed. From the surface of the *Langtuk* to its bottom a path with red and white threads is made. This is considered to be the path through which the soul or the spirit of the deceased can go to the bottom of the tank to accept what have been offered to it as gifts.

When the fixation of the *Pirsikpi* and *Pirsikso* is over, a piece of white cloth is to be spread covering the entire surface of the *Langtuk*. There is a big hole in this piece of cloth through which the sacrificed animals and other offerings are thrown to the bottom of *Langtuk*.

At first a hen is sacrificed to the deceased. After cutting its throat with a sharp knife, it is thrown to the bottom of the *Langtuk*. This is followed by the sacrifice of a pig. The sacrifice of the pig is done in the following way:—

The pig is held tightly by a few persons while the maternal uncle cuts its throat which is not completely severed. Blood

oozing out is held in a pot. The blood thus held will be drunk raw later on. This is followed by the sacrifice of a pigeon and a duck. If the death ceremony is observed for more than one person, a hen, pig, a pigeon and duck will have to be sacrificed for each deceased person. The meats of the sacrificed animals and birds are distributed later on among the members of the *Chomfangs*, meaning the village parties. The meats shall have to be cooked and eaten at *Chomangkan* ground. In this connection it may be mentioned here that all the sacrifices will have to be done by the maternal uncle of the deceased person for whom the death ceremony is being celebrated. In his absence, the closely related brother of the maternal uncle will have to perform the sacrifices.

Then takes place the invitation ceremony called *Ari Rongketon*. The host called *Ari* has to extend formal invitation to the village parties (*Chomfang*) once again. (The *Chomfangs* have already been invited to attend the death ceremony.)

But some of the village parties might come even without invitation. Any way, the village parties generally come to attend the celebration with the drums and the *Jambeli Athons*. Some of the parties may come only with drums and without the *Jambeli Athons*. These parties encamp at some distance from the place where the actual performance of the death ceremony is held. In extending the formal invitation to *Chomfangs* some traditional as well as customary formalities have to be observed. There are definite traditional rules as to the party which is to be invited first and which is to be invited last and these rules have to be followed strictly. The *Karbis* have three sections among them and they are the *Chinthongs*, the *Ronghangs* and the *Amris*. These divisions actually refer to their migration and final settlement in the bygone days and, therefore, should not be confused with clans (*Kur*). In the festivals the *Amris* are not treated at par with the *Chinthongs* and the *Ronghangs*. Now if the *Chomangkan* is held in the area inhabited by the *Ronghang* division, first formal invitation (*Ari Rongketong*) will have to be extended to the *Ronghang* group belonging to the *Mauzadar's* village. Then, invitation will be extended

to the other Chomfangs of the Ronghang division of the Mauza to which the host belongs. Next invitation will be extended to the Chomfangs belonging to the Chinthong division. The remaining Chomfangs including those who have come without the Jambeli Athons will be invited last. If the death ceremony is held in an area inhabited by the Chinthong division, the same procedure as described above will have to be followed giving first preference to the Chomfang of the Chinthong group belonging to the Mauzadar's village. In the Ari Rongketon ceremony the host or his representative accompanied by his relatives, a group of dancing youths and drummers goes to each Chomfang as mentioned above and extends formal invitation by offering Horlang (rice beer), Chira (flattened rice), Banta (a bundle of betel-nut meant for a respect), So-Ek-A (a kind of colour to blaken teeth) and a Thengton (a bundle of dried split bamboos meant for using as a torch at night) to participate in the ceremony. The offering of these items is meant for those Chomfangs which bring drums only. But if a party brings the Jambeli Athon also, two more bottles of Horlang and a Banta are to be offered in addition to those mentioned above. When the invitation of all the parties is over and the host and his companions with the dancing troupe and the drummers return back to the place of starting, the Chomfangs arrive at the place where the actual death ceremony is being held to participate in the dances that are to be performed subsequently.

When the formal invitation ceremony called Ari Rongketon is over and all the village parties assemble at the ceremonial ground to participate in the dance performance, the ceremonial dance called Chomsinguang is started. This dance is of two types namely, Chomsokedam and Chompikedam.

The dance Chomsokedam is performed by a group of male dancers from each village separately in turn. The dancers in their traditional dresses and ornaments perform a warrior dance keeping perfect rhythm with the drum beatings. The drummers should also belong to the same party. Each dancer is equipped with a wooden decorated sword (Nok) in his right hand and a shield (Chong) made of rhinocer's skin

in his left hand. At the beginning the dancers dance in one group, but later on they become divided into two groups and go dancing in opposite directions brandishing their swords. Returning from the opposite directions, the dancers indulge in mock fighting while they face each other. After this mock fighting the two groups become one and dance in the same direction. This dance Chomsokedam actually represents the warriors' struggles against the evil spirits which have ultimately been conquered by them (the warriors). This dance is at first performed by the troupe of the host village. The host village is followed one by one by the village bringing Jambeli Athons with them and then the villages bringing drums but without Jambeli Athons. The villages which have not come with drums are not allowed to participate in this dance as a general rule.

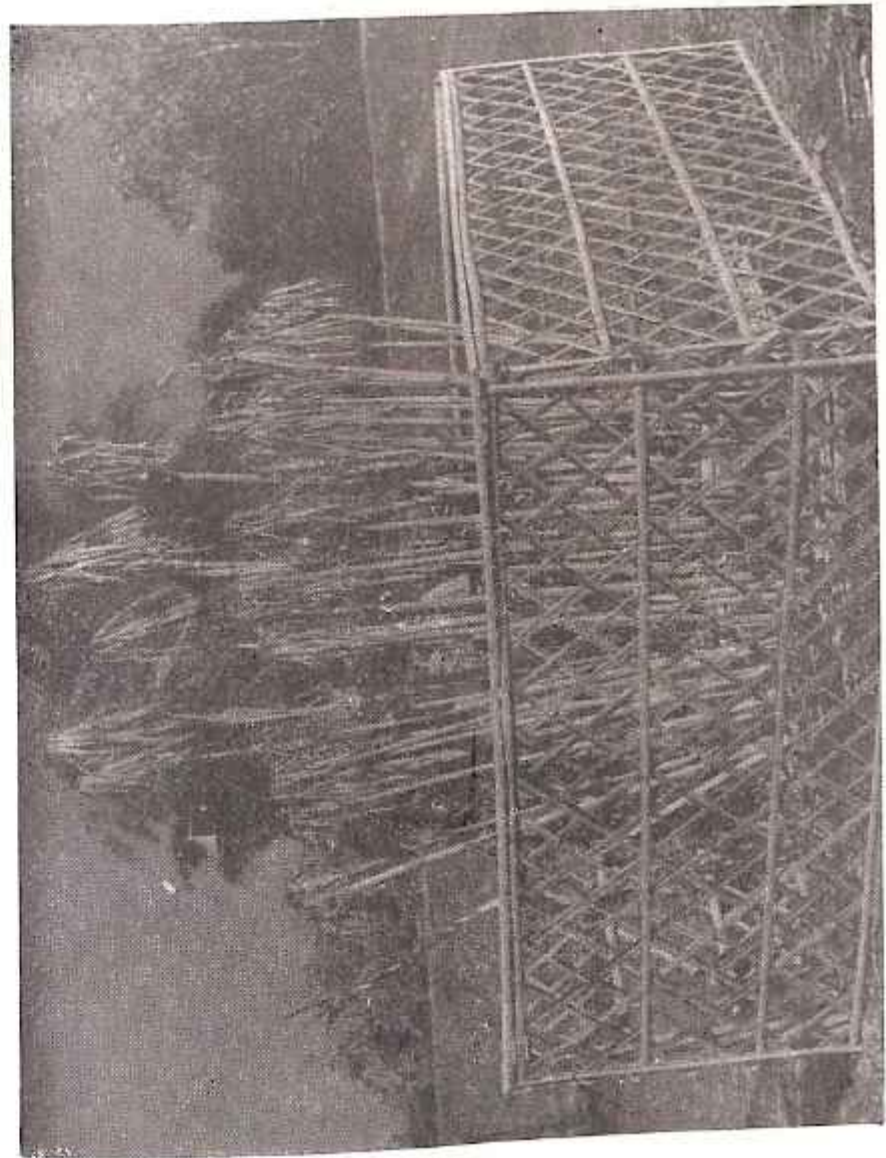
The other dance, namely, Chompikedam is more important than the one mentioned above because of the fact that from the performance of this dance the actual number of Chomfangs who have come to participate in the death ceremony, irrespective of the receipt of formal invitation or not, can be found out. From the ceremony of Ari Rongketon the number of only those Chomfangs who have come with Jambeli Athons and drums and those parties who have come with drums only can be found out. But some Chomfangs might come without the drums even. Their actual number can be determined only from the performance of this dance. This dance, called Chompikedam, is performed by a pair of male dancers in traditional dresses, each bearing a shield and a sword. Here also like Chomsokedam, the first lead has to be given by the Ari or the host village. Two male dancers from the host village start dancing in the accompaniment of drum beatings in the same direction. Then they will dance in opposite directions brandishing their swords, in course of their dance they cross each other thrice which indicates that they have completed three rounds. Next the villages coming with Jambeli Athons will be asked to participate one by one. A dancer from each village will be accompanied by a dancer from the host village. In this case also the pair will dance three rounds. Then the

villages bringing only the drums will be asked to participate one by one and the same procedure mentioned above will be followed. When the Chompikedam of these two groups will be completed, the villages which have come without the drums will be asked to take part. Name of each participating Chomfang will be recorded in a sheet of paper. Like the previous two groups here also a dancer from each Chomfang will be accompanied by a dancer from the host village. In this way the exact number of Chomfangs that have come to participate in the death ceremony could be determined. It may be mentioned here that the minimum number of drums required in the performance of Chomsokedam should not be less than two. The drums are beaten up-side down. In Chompikedam more than a score of drums are used. Further, there are two different sets of drum beatings for these two dances. Drum beatings used in Chomsokedam cannot be used in Chompikedam and vice-versa.

HORCHIMAI

At the time of the performance of the dance Chomsingnang, another ceremony called Horchimai is held a little away under an open hut or a tent. In this ceremony gifts called Tipul are offered to the Ari (host) by the individuals, families and the Chomfangs who have received formal invitation to the death ceremony. The gifts generally consist of bottles of Horlang, country spirit and cash money in varying amounts. If only one bottle of Horlang is offered it is meant for the deceased only. If two bottles are offered, one is meant for the deceased and other is meant for the Ari (host). As soon as the presentation ceremony is over, the host will give back the bottle meant for him to the giver as a token of respect and also as an expression of gratitude for so kindly participating in the ceremony. The cash amounts received by him, however, will not be parted with but will be retained by the Ari himself.

The dance Chomsingnang is followed by the dance called Nimsokerung. In this dance youths of the host village and guest villages take part. This is rather a merrymaking dance



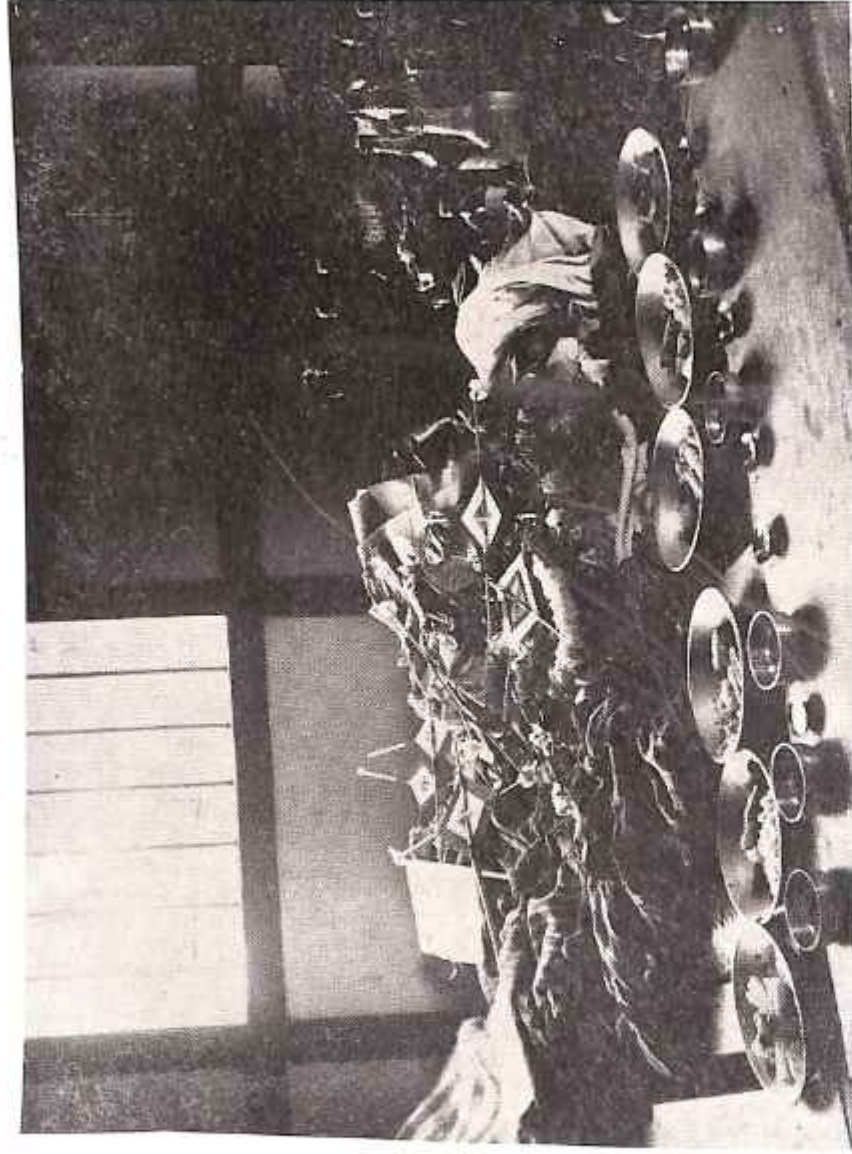
A view of the BANJAR erected outside the cremation ground near the village gate



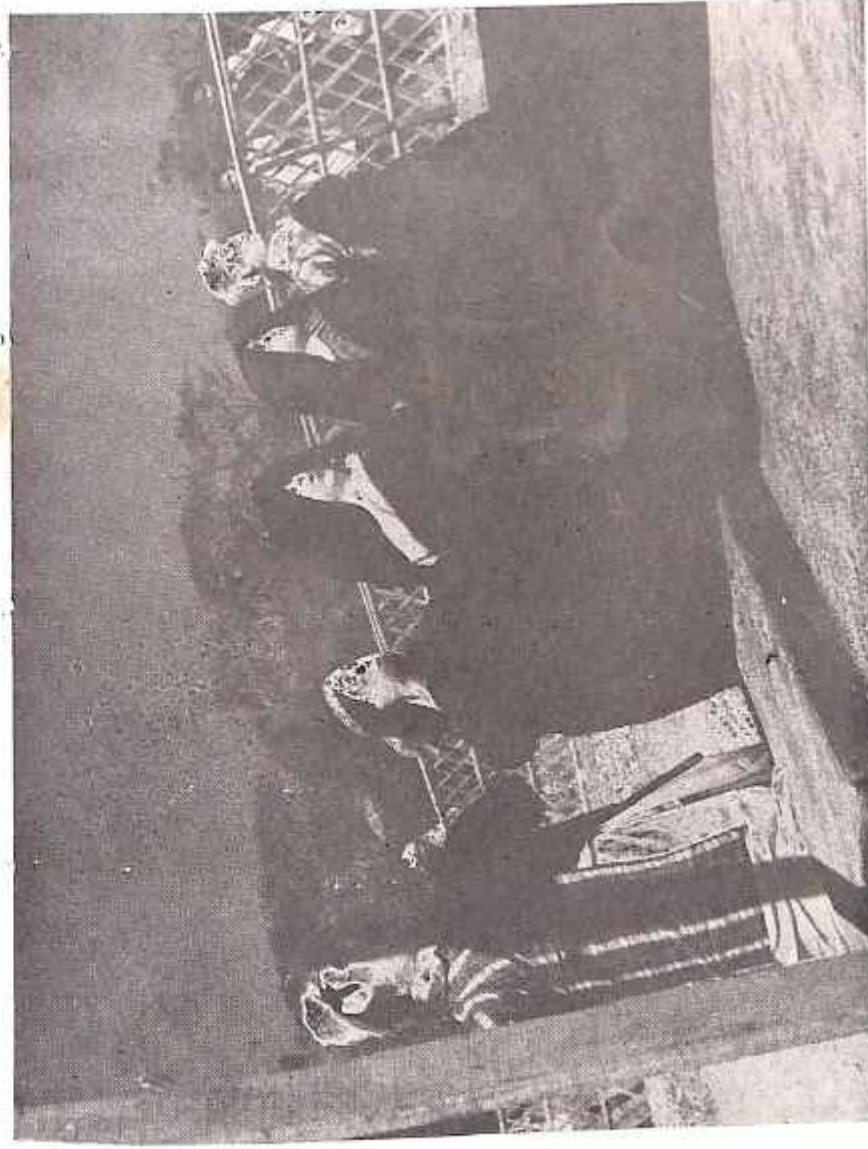
Performance of the ceremony NODAK ALANG TUK near HONGTHOR.



Old Karbi women carrying the charred bones (souls) represented by cowries of the deceased to their homes from the cremation ground in pieces of cloths taken with them specially for this purpose.



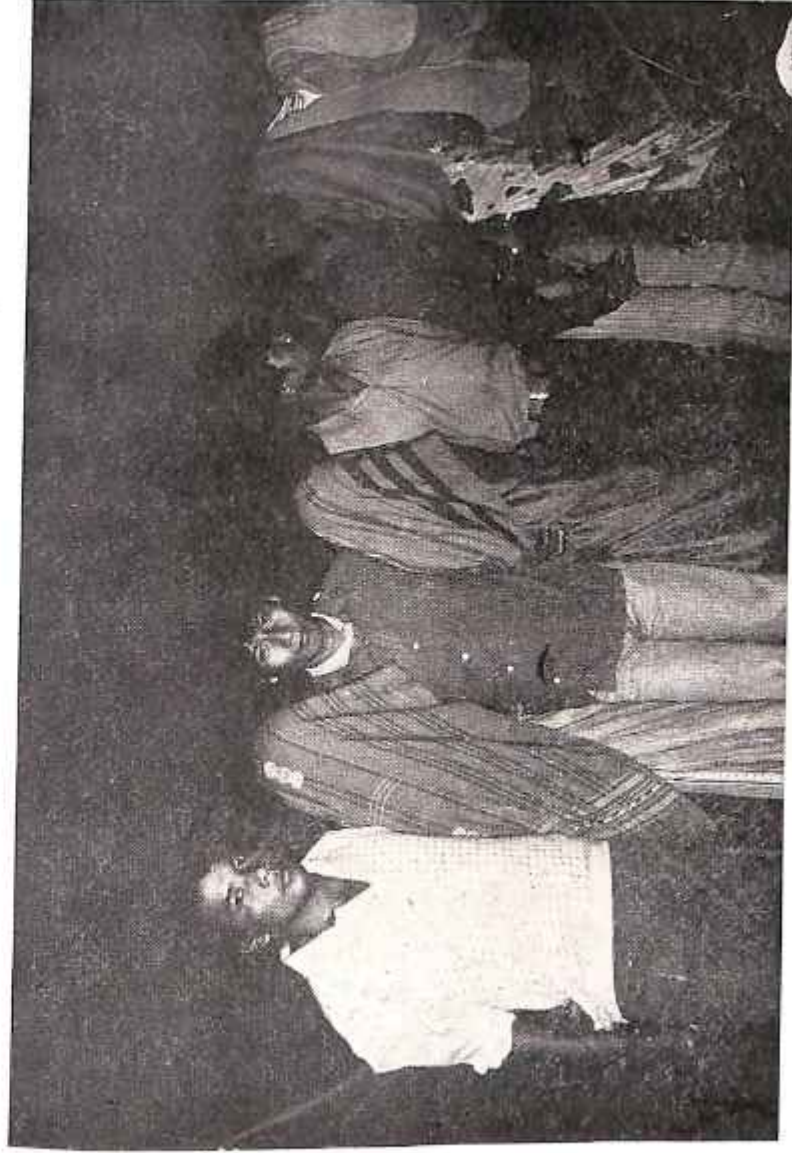
Offering of ANJAM and other articles to the deceased, here represented by straw effigies, in an inner room of the family.



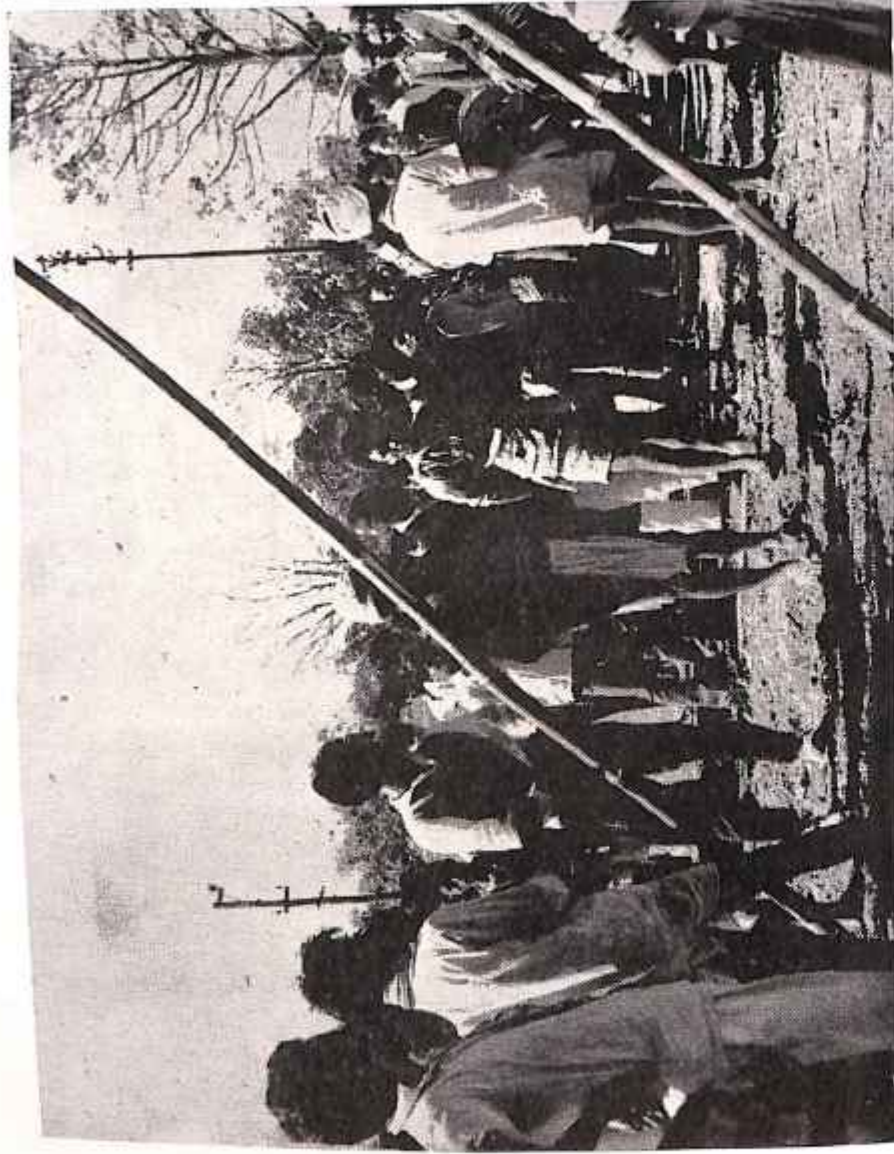
Concrete busts of the deceased called LONG-E erected in front of the LANGTUK (pond) specially dug for the observance of the death ceremony.



Karbi youths singing KAPA-ER.



Performance of the dance called NIMSOKERUNG by Karbi boys and girls. Girls are seen here veiled with scarfs making them incognito.



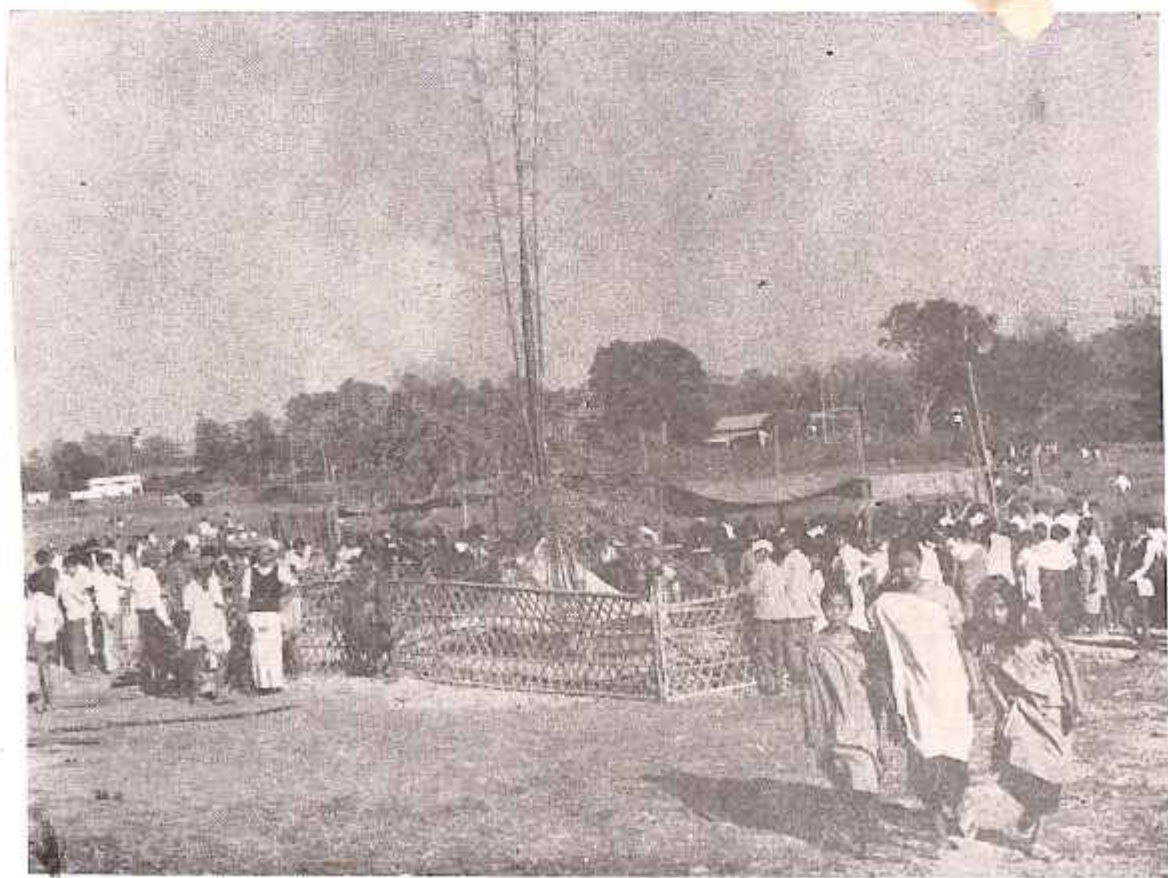
A view of ceremonial cutting of bamboos.



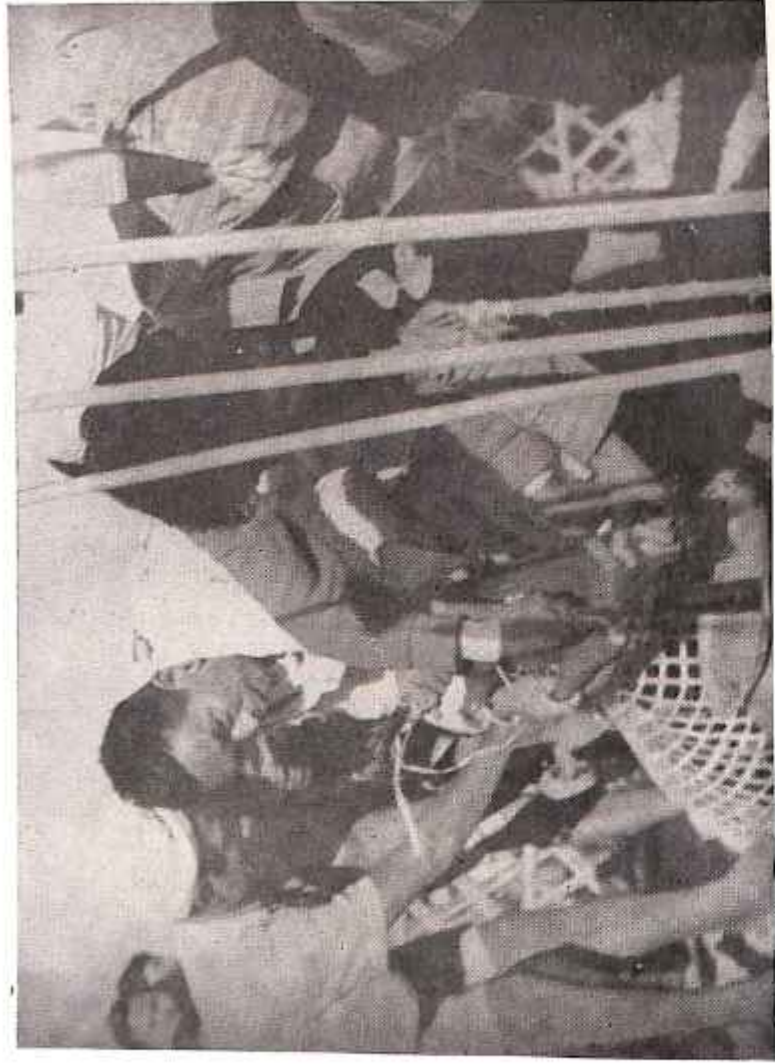
The procession called RONGKETON taken out from the home of the deceased to the ground where the LANGTIUK has already been dug in the late hours of the first half on the second day.



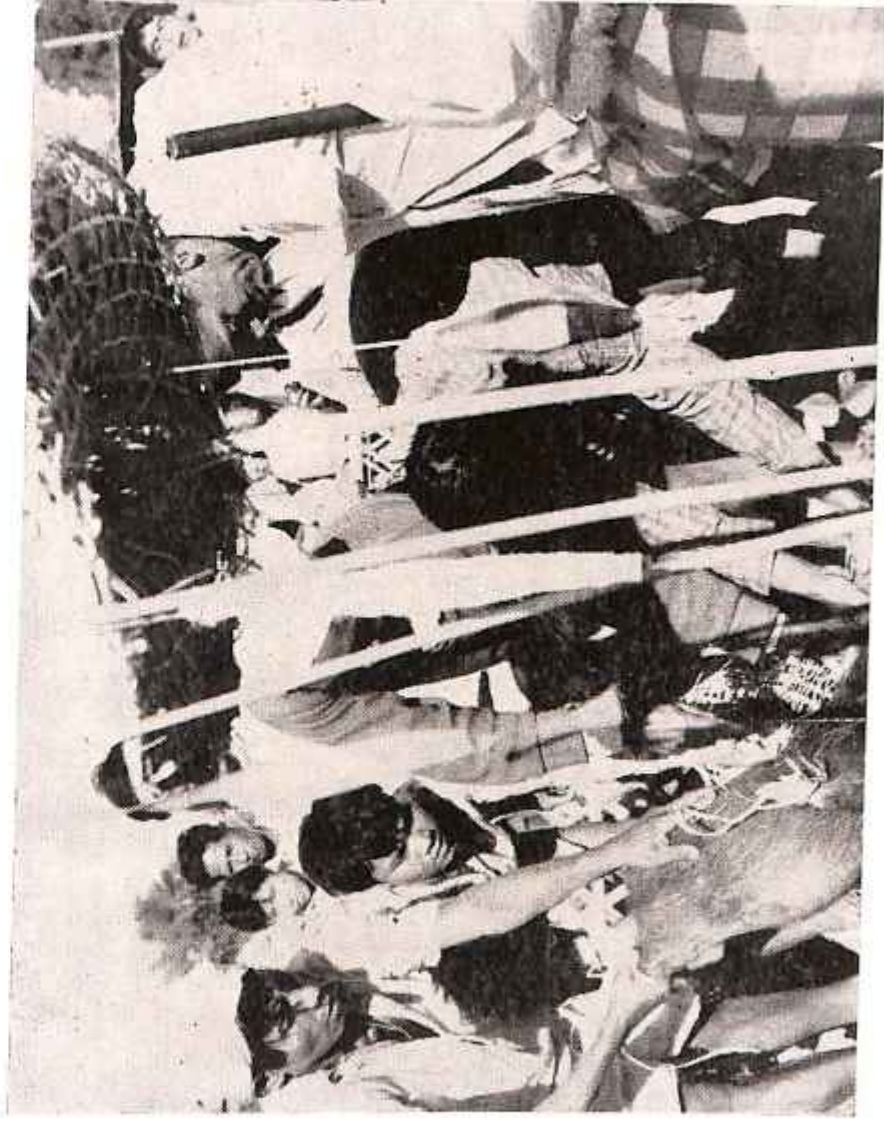
Fixing of the tallest bamboos called PIRSIKPI at the centre of the LANGTUK.



A full view of the LANGTUK after the fixation of the PIRSIKPI (tallest bamboos) and PIRSIKSO (small bamboos) and covering it with a piece of white cloth.



Sacrificing a pig by the maternal uncle of the deceased. Blood oozing out from the cut uncle is held in a pot.



Another view of the sacrificing a pig.



Karbi youths performing a group dance.

for the grown up Karbi boys and girls. The participants dance round and round in a circle. For this dance equal number of boys and girls are required. The order is one boy and a girl and so on. The boys and the girls at first hold their hands each other and later on hold each other by the waists. The youths dance in perfect rhythm in the accompaniment of drum beatings. The movements are very mild and, in fact, they simply moves their steps round the circle. But the most interesting feature that is to be noted here in connection with the performance of this dance is the fact that the boys and the girls of the same clan are not allowed to hold each other either by hand or by waist. The girl between the two boys, therefore, must not belong to the same clan as that of either of the two boys. For further clarification on this point we may take the following example :—

In Nimsokerung the position of B, who is a girl, is in between A and C who are boys. A belongs to the Kur (clan) Teron, while C belongs to the clan Timung. B, therefore, cannot belong either to Teron or to Timung. She must belong to any of the remaining three clans, namely, Terang, Enghi or Ingti. This has been observed because of the fact that the Karbis are strictly exogamous and the boys and the girls of the same clan are brothers and sisters. Another interesting aspect of this dance is the fact that the participating girls veil their heads with scarfs while dancing. The reasons for covering their heads with scarfs may be ascribed to the following reasons :-

As regards the singing of the obscene song Kapa-er mention has already been made earlier. Even during the performance of the dance Nimsokerung the singing of Kapa-er goes on at full swing. The parents, guardians and other relatives of the girls participating in the dance Nimsokerung might be present there, and the girls, therefore, might feel ashamed. In order to avoid recognition and also to avoid gazes and stares of the relatives, the girls hid their faces under the veils. The girls are thus saved from an embarrassing situation.

In the Rongkhong area the tradition allows only the unmarried boys and girls to participate in Nimsokerung. In

other areas this tradition is not strictly followed. Married young men and women also sometimes participate in this dance.

The dance Nimsokerung may be continued for the whole night by different groups of youths. The youths are so much over-powered with joy that they practically forget about their tiredness dancing continuously for hours together.

RONGKETHON

The fourth day in the performance of the death ceremony is called Rongkethon or Arongkethon which literally means the carrying of the dead body to the cremation ground. The straw effigy which is considered to be the dead body of the deceased is carried to the Tipit (cremation ground) in a specially constructed Dula (bier) for burning them in the Methur Hem Kim (funeral pyre) on this day after night-fall when all the ceremonies are over.

Early in the morning after the return of the Chomfangs and the other people from the ceremonial ground at the completion of the dance Nimsokerung, an important ceremony is held at the courtyard of the host where the holy verse called Masira Kohir is recited. It will be of great importance to mention here that the Karbis consider the recitation of this verse to be the holiest just like the chanting of the Vedas. Masira Kohir can be recited only during the performance of death ceremony. Recitation of this verse at other times is a taboo that has to be observed strictly. This holy song not only narrates the basic principles of creation so far as the Karbis are concerned but traces the history of the origin also of the Karbis from the deem past. An idea of holy verse Masira Kohir is given below :-¹

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Eli Karbitang Te
Niomke Ki Doukok
Nihat Keki Doukok | 1. We, the Karbis, have some rules and regulations amongst us. |
| 2. Kiplang Shingthum Nangkok
Kefi Shingthum Nangkok | 2. Let these rules and regulations regarding our origin be stated. |

1. English rendering of the verse is given side by side.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 3. Kiplang Lapuhel
Kefi Lapuhel | 3. The story relating to our origin is like this : |
| 4. Tijili Akengri
Timarali Akengri
Karbinang Plang Loke | 4. The Karbis were born under the Foudiaf Mangrifera (A kind of tree with sour fruits called Amara in Assamese). |
| 5. Wo Plak Pi Ati Pensi
Wo Plak Pi Ajang Pensi | 5. They were born from the egg of a bird called 'Wo Plak Pi.' |
| 6. Atike Pum Churi
Ajanke Pum Churi
Apumke Achim
Apumke Ahom | 6. From one of the thousand eggs laid by the bird called 'Wo Plak Pi' an unfamiliar human race called 'Ahom' (Assamese) was first born. |
| 7. Apumke Chomang
Apumke Keche | 7. From another egg a human race called Chomang (Khasis) was born. |
| 8. Apumke Konglongda
Apumke Konglongchet | 8. There was a bigger egg also. |
| 9. Apumke Naka
Apumke Nara ! | 9. Another human race known as Naka (Nagas) was born from an egg. |
| 10. Eli Karbitangte
Eli Karbaktangte | 10. We, the Karbis. |
| 11. Li Sonu Pusi
Liso-Kleng Pusi | 11. The egg in which the Karbis were staying was the biggest of all. |
| 12. Pirthe Nanglangloke
Minder Nanglang Loke | 12. The Karbis had come to see the world. In other words they had come to take birth in the world. |

1. Although there is a race of Tai-speaking people known as Nara in Assam the term Nara in Masira Kohir, perhaps, refers to the Nagas only. The Naras belong to the Shan tribes.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 13. Pirthe Kekang Kobi
Minder Kekang Kobi | 13. They were peeping at the world from inside the egg. |
| 14. Hie Patelang Pit
Arnam Patelang Pit | 14. They saw that the demons and the demon-gods were searching the human beings for the purpose of devouring them. |
| 15. Takun Patelang Pit
Wo Ak Patelang Pit | 15. The vultures and the crows were also flying in the sky in search of food (human beings) |
| 16. Eli Karbi Tangte
Eli Karbak Tangte | 16. We, the Karbis. |
| 17. Sonn Pake Joinak
Sokleng Pake Joinak | 17. It appeared to us that our egg was said to be the biggest one for no reason at all. |
| 18. Heitak Fereduk
Arnam Ta Fereduk | 18. Because the Karbis were afraid of the demons and the demon-gods. |
| 19. Plang Rangrang Plank
Haihedet
Firang Rang Fi Hai Hedet | 19. Then Karbis popped their heads out of the egg with great fear. |
| 20. Bang Baka Pute
Bang Nara Pute | 20. The Nagas came out. |
| 21. Bang Karbi Put
Bang Kabak Pute ² | 21. At last Karbis came out of the egg with great fear. |

1. The holy verse Masira Kohir is reproduced here from Joyguram Gogoi's unpublished book 'Karbi Sanskriti and Asom'.

The story narrated in the holy verse Masira Kohir in regard to the creation of the Karbis has some similarity with the legend of the creation of the Dimasa Kacharis. The origin of the Karbis and the Dimasas was from an egg in each case. While the bird Wo Plak Pi had laid one thousand eggs, the divine bird Arikhidima according to Dimasa legend, had laid only seven eggs. Out of the biggest egg the Karbis as a race had come out and prior to their birth other human races like the Assamese, Khasis, Nagas, etc. were also born out of the eggs of the bird called Wo Plak Pi. But from the first six eggs of the bird called Wo Plak Pi. But from the first six eggs of Arikhidima only the forefathers of the Dimasas were born and out of the seventh and last egg of Arikhidima the devils were born¹.

Anyway, it can be assumed that the holy verse MASIRA Kohir might have been composed only after the migration of the Karbis to Assam and their settlement around the areas inhabited by the Nagas, Assamese and the Khasis. The very reference of the terms Ahom/Achim, Chomang/Keche, and Naka/Nara clearly indicates the fact that these peoples were well-known to the Karbis at the time of composing the holy verse Masira Kohir.

The great sacredness with which this verse is treated is an important matter. It is treated like a closely guarded secret restricting its use on other occasions and places except during the observance of the death ceremony. It can be inferred from this that the holy verse Masira Kohir has the greatest spiritual value. This holy verse recited during the observance of death ceremony, perhaps, enables the spirit of the dead person to know that the Karbis as a race had come to this world in an atmosphere charged with hostile creatures like the demons, vultures, etc. It reminds the spirit that if it is reborn again his life would not be easy sailing because of the existence of so many evil spirits ready to bounce upon their prey.

1. For further details reference may be made to the book by the author entitled "The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hills District of Assam", Gauhati-1975.

Ari village (host village) is to be taken into consideration first. The second consideration is to be given to the people belonging to the Mauza to which the host belongs. The third consideration will go to the Hemai (the blacksmith who has manufactured the iron tools and implements used in the death ceremony). After the distribution of the Ser-Awan among the people of the aforesaid three groups, the other people whether invited or uninvited will get, rather claim their shares. It is, therefore, a very elaborate process. Under no circumstances mistakes should be committed. The wrong part of the meat should not be offered to a person who is entitled to receive a right part. Hence arises the necessity of observing every care. In fact, in the bygone days, quarrels and disputes arose out of wrong distribution of meat. Even today also a minor mistake might lead to a quarrel or a dispute of lesser intensity.

HORMU CHARDUNG & KANGKER KEKAN

In the second half of the fourth day two other ceremonies of minor importance, namely, Hormu Chardung and Kangker Kekan, are performed inside the room where the straw effigy representing the dead body of the deceased person is kept.

The ceremony called Hormu Chardung is held first. For this ceremony two drums are required. The drums are tied together and suspended from the timber or bamboo beam of the room with the help of a strong rope about a metre above the floor. The Duihudi (the master drummer) and the Duhujang (the principal assistant to the Duihudi) beat the drums by facing each other. The beatings indicate final farewell to the deceased so far as the beatings of the drum are concerned. This may, therefore, be regarded as farewell-drum beating ceremony. While the Duihudi and the Duhujang play on the drums, the Uchepi requests the deceased to take away whatever he or she is given for the purpose of carrying with him or her to the other world.

The ceremony of Hormu Chardung is followed by the ceremony called Kangker Kekan. In this ceremony also, the Duihudi and the Duhujang play on the two separate drums facing each other. An aged man in his traditional dress stands near the drummers and moves his palms up and down in accordance with the rhythms of the drum-beatings. It may be mentioned here that the drum beatings in Kangker Kekan totally differ from those that are used in Hormu Chardung. A few boys dance by the side of the old man keeping rhythms with the drum-beatings and shout "Hei, Hei" and the old man while moving his palms up and down repeats these words.

The upward and downward movements of the palms of the old man in Kangker Kekan may be interpreted in the following way :

The upward movement of the palms indicates that the deceased is going to leave this world and on the way of entering the other world. The downward movement, on the other hand, indicates that the deceased may come to this world again and may be reborn in the same family in the near or far future.

MUSARA CHINGKI-THE CEREMONY OF APOLOGY

When the distribution of Ser-Awan (the holy pig meat) is over, the ceremony of apology called Musara Chingki has to be observed by the host. Through the recitation of a verse the host, in a mood of submission, will enquire from the guests about the whole affair, such as the mistakes that might have been committed unknowingly at the time of distribution of Ser-Awan, the thefts that might have been occurred to the guests, unpleasant scenes that might have been created by some silly boys and girls to the displeasures of the guests, discourtesies that might have been shown to the guests, loves uncalled for that might have been shown to the guest girls by the young boys of the families of the host, insufficiency of food and drink that might have been experienced by the honourable guests, and so on and so forth. The host, in

fact, wants to find out from the guests if there has been any wrong that might have been committed in any form in respect of reception accorded to the invited guests. The enquires of the host will be answered by the leading guests—sometimes one or two leaders from each invited village and sometimes one or two guests having commands over the others will reply to the queries on behalf of all the invited guests. The guests generally reply that no offences or mistakes have been committed by the host and his family members in according them reception and everything has been run to their satisfaction. But in most cases it is not so easy sailing. There are some persons who, in fact, keep themselves ready to grab this occasion to their advantage when some adverse situations, however minor they might be, occur in course of according reception to the guests. Under such circumstances the guests will express their displeasures and the hosts will have to make up the loss by paying compensations either in cash or in kind or in both. If the guests could point out more and more faults, they could demand more and more compensations and this process could go on for hours together. This ceremony would have ended up into petty quarrels but for the submissive attitude of the hosts.

RONGCHAM KEDAM

The ceremony called *Rongcham Kedam* is performed by the youths of the *Risomar* in the late afternoon and the performance of this ceremony entitles them to bring the *Banjar* posts to the courtyard of the host. In the performance of this ceremony the *Dula* (bier) plays a very important part. The *Dula* is specially constructed at the residence of the host for carrying the effigy of the deceased to the cremation ground at night when all the ceremonial functions will be over. The *Dula* is very beautifully decorated and provision is made for carrying it by four persons. Before sunset four youths of the *Risomar* take the *Dula* on their shoulders and move three rounds in the courtyard of the house. Taking

a cock, a chick and an egg for each deceased a person the youths of the *Risomar* then go in a procession with the *Dula* to the place where the *Banjar* has been erected. On arriving the place the *Dula* is moved three rounds keeping the *Banjar* in the centre. The *Dula* is then placed aside and the cock taken with them is sacrificed at first by cutting its neck with a sharp knife. The blood of the sacrificed cock is smeared at three places of the *Banjar*. This is followed by the sacrifice of the chick and the smearing of its blood in three places of the *Banjar* as has been done earlier in respect of the blood of the sacrificed cock. The egg is also split into two halves. One half of the egg is held in a plantain leaf and the other half is inserted into a small bamboo basket hanging from the *Banjar* post. The cock sacrificed here is roasted by lighting a fire near the *Banjar* and its meat is taken by the youths present there immediately after roasting. This ceremony in which the roasted meat of the sacrificed cock is eaten near the *Banjar* is called *Rongcham Wo Kephi*.

When the ceremonial meat eating is over, the *Banjar* post, the *Serosoes* (six pieces of decorated bamboo sticks erected near the *Banjar*) and the smaller bamboo pieces meant for *Banjar Kekan* (*Banjar* dance) are taken home along with the *Dula*. The *Banjar* post and the *Serosoes* are fixed near the *Pirsik* (A fully grown bamboo with leaves fixed at the centre of the front courtyard) where the first *Hongvat* (the sacrifice of she-goat) is to be performed. It may be mentioned here that the *Jambeli Athons* brought by the *Chomfangs* are fixed in a row near the *Pirsik*. The ceremony of *Rongcham Kedam* comes to an end along with the fixing of the *Banjar* post and the *Serosoes* near the *Pirsik* in the front courtyard of the residence of the host. The ceremony of *Rongcham Kedam* is followed by another ceremony. Just before the disappearance of the twilight a chick about one month old will have to be sacrificed for each dead person by cutting only the main artery at the throat. This is done with a view to inviting the youths to participate in the ceremonies to be followed.

BANJAR KEKAN

When the ceremony of *Rongcham Kedam* is over, the dance called *Banjar Kekan* is performed by the youths and

other male persons. As this dance is performed around the Banjar posts it is called Banjar Kekan—the term Kekan meaning a dance.

Banjar Kekan consists of four rounds. At first the male persons specially the able-bodied ones, taking the Banjar post and the Serosoes (smaller bamboo sticks kept near the main Banjar post) in their hands simply go round the Pirsik fixed at the front courtyard with rhythmic steps in accordance with the beatings of the drums with joyous shouts like 'He-o, He-o, He-o'.

In the second round the dancers will form into two groups with the bamboo sticks in their hands. The two groups of dancers standing opposite will rush with great force and cross each other as if they were fighting a battle. This round of the dance is called Vorek Cherchu.

In the second round they will perform a dance called Kekan Kengphu Chenep in which the male dancers will form into a circle and by catching hold of each other's thighs with their hands will dance around the Pirsik bending their heads down several times till they become completely tired. Just before completion of this dance they will stand up by disengaging their hands and shout, again 'He—0, He—0, He—0'. As this dance requires sufficient physical stamina it cannot be continued for a fairly long time.

In the last round the dancers will perform the dance in a circle by interlocking their legs each other. Sometimes they will clap their hands and shout 'He—0, He—0, He—0'. This part of the dance is called Ken Chivek. Like Kekan Kengphu Chenep this dance also cannot be continued for a long time as the dancers find it difficult to dance with interlocking legs.

When the Banjar Kekan is over, all the Jambeli Athons fixed near the Pirsik will be withdrawn by the respective Chomfangs.

KA—SOLE

The last ceremonial offering of food to the deceased in his or her house by the relatives is called Ka-Sole or last

food giving ceremony. Till this ceremony the responsibility of offering specially prepared food to the deceased has been with Uchepi. But so far as the last food giving ceremony is concerned, the Uchepi has no place here. The food containing cooked rice and curry is placed on a piece of plantain plate. A reed pipe filled with Horlang (rice-beer) is also placed in each plate. For a dead man there should be at least 15 plates of food and 15 reed-pipes filled with rice beer. The food plates are kept in a row. The food plates will have to be brought to the effigy representing the deceased by two persons at a time. The persons who shall have to participate in Ka-Sole are the following:-

(I) Ari Asar (Host), (II) Nihu Asar (Father-in-law), (III) Engjir Arlo (Sister's husband), (IV) Su-Suphilli (Niece) and (V) Reg Asar (Very influential village headman having command over a few villages.)

The term Asar here is used as a mark of respect. A niece (sister's daughter) is usually called Philipi. But on festivals like the observance of death ceremony she has to perform some specific duties. Hence the term Su-Suphilli is used on such occasion to denote the niece as a mark of respect.

The order of precedence for bringing food to the dead from the courtyard to the inner room is as follows :-

The first round of food plates will be carried by the Ari Asar and the Nihu Asar in a basket. Ari Asar will stay behind and the Nihu Asar will return. In the second round food plates will be carried by Nihu Asar and Engjir Arlo. While Nihu Asar will remain behind Engjir Arlo will return back. In the third round Engjir Arlo and Su-Suphilli will carry food plates to the deceased. While Engjir Arlo will remain, Su-Suphilli will return. In the fourth and last round Su-Suphilli and Reg Asar will carry the remaining food plates. With the fourth round the last food giving ceremony for one dead person is complete. If the death ceremony is observed for more than one person, the same procedure will have to be repeated for each dead person.

PREPARATION FOR THE LAST JOURNEY

The Dula (Bier) of which mention has been made earlier, is then placed outside the courtyard just in front of the main entrance to the house. The straw effigy representing the deceased is wrapped up with all the articles offered. Out of four Mithongrangs placed on the body of the straw effigy on the first day, two will have to be destroyed one at the front door and the other at the back door of the house on the second day of the ceremony. The other two Mithongrangs will be carried with the deadbody for the purpose of using them as doors of the miniature farm house already constructed in the cremation ground on the second day of the ceremony. If the deceased is a woman a porcupine thorn used by the woman in weaving, while she was alive, is placed by the side of the effigy. If the deceased is a male person, a cross bow will be placed by the side of the effigy. In the cremation ground these two articles will not be destroyed but will be taken by the Ong Nihu (Maternal uncle).

The straw effigy representing the deceased is taken out from the inner room, placed inside the Dula and then covered with a lid. On this lid cloths of different varieties are hung. Offerings of Horlang and Banta will then take place.

The Dula is then carried by four youths to a circle where the first Hongvat (the place where the sacrifice of a she-goat is performed) will have to be performed. The procession is led by the Duihudi, the Duhujang and the other drummers. The drummers are followed by the four youths carrying the Dula. They are followed by a group of men carrying the Banjar posts and Mirkois (Mirkois refer to the pieces of red and white clothes fixed at the top of bamboo sticks). This group will be followed by a man carrying the pigeons, then by a man carrying the goose/duck and then by a man carrying the she-goats. The remaining persons will form the last

group in the procession. The processionists go round the first Hongvat where the Pirsik has been planted. On completion of the first round there will be a blank gun fire and the Ong-Nihu will sacrifice a pigeon for each dead person by cutting its throat. The head of the pigeon will be thrown towards the youths who will have to catch it with their shield. On completion of the second round there will be another blank fire from a gun. This will be followed by the sacrifice of a goose/duck for each of the dead persons by Ong-Nihu. The severed head of the goose/duck will be thrown towards the youths who will have to catch it with their shields. As soon as the sacrifice of the goose/duck is over there will be another blank fire from a gun when the Ong-Nihu will sacrifice a she-goat for each of the dead persons by cutting its head with a Dao in one stroke. It will be a matter of great shame for Ong-Nihu if he fails to sever the head of the she-goat with one stroke. Prior to the sacrifice of the she-goat, So-Suphili will be teasing the Ong-Nihu regarding his probable failure to sever the head of the she-goat with one stroke. So he will have to be very much careful. Like the other two previous cases, the head of the she-goat will again be thrown towards the members of the Risomar who will invariably catch it with the help of the shield. If they fail to do so, it will be a matter of great shame for them. Hence this is also an issue of prestige.

The procession will then be led towards the Tipit (cremation ground). On the way to the Tipit the processionists will stop near the Langtuk where multiple religious rites were performed on the previous day and also stop at the middle of the road to perform the second Hongvat. Here also a pigeon, a goose/duck and two she-goats are sacrificed for each dead person repeating the process mentioned earlier. The only difference is that here the sacrifice is done by the Engjir-Arlo (sister's husband) instead of Ong-Nihu.

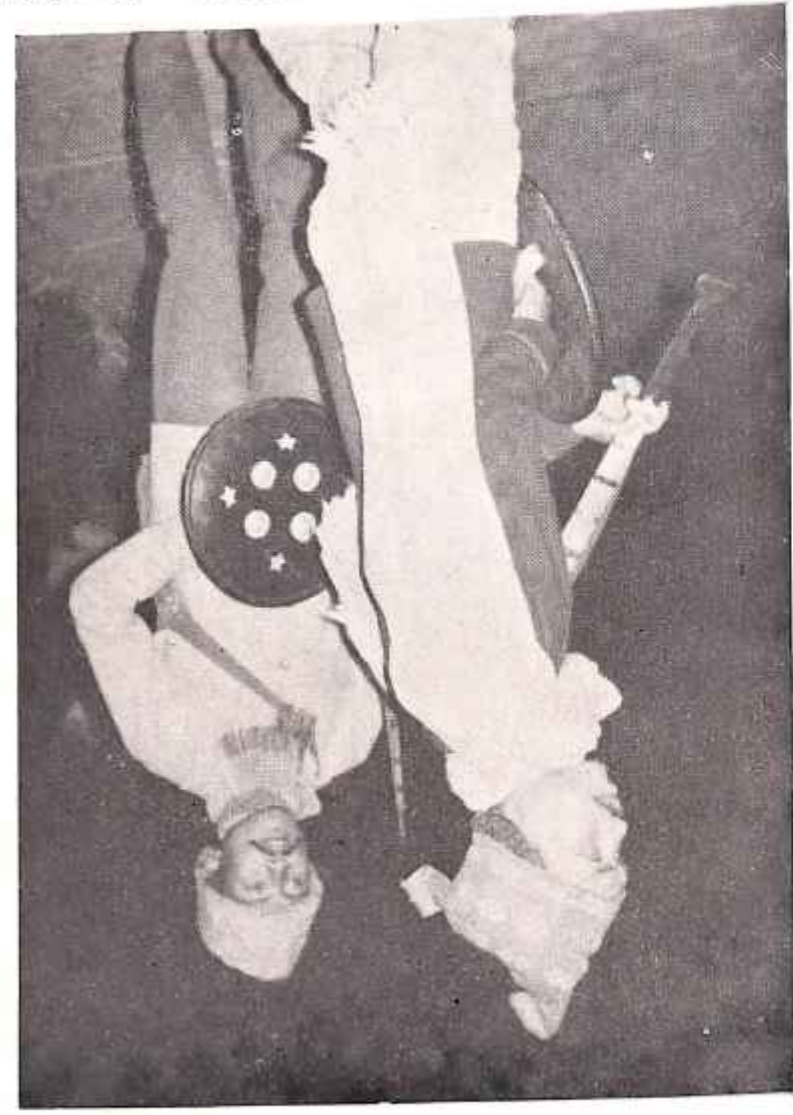
At last the procession will arrive at the Tipit. Just at the entrance to the Tipit an incantation with the splitting of betel-nut is to be performed. Then the Dula is taken

inside the Tipit and placed on the ground near the Theri Hem Kim, meaning the funeral pyre, prepared on the second day of the death ceremony. The third Hongyat is performed here by killing a she-goat and its meat is consumed by the processionists then and there after observing the cooking formalities. Uchepti in the mean time gives the final touch to the Manduso, the miniature farm house constructed in the Tipit on the second day of the ceremony, by filling up the odds and ends. She will also make a fencing round the Manduso. In the meantime the straw effigy representing the dead person will be taken out from the Dula and placed on the Theri Hem Kim. In a corner of the Tipit a man will kill a chick and prepare the last food for the deceased in a bamboo pipe. When the food is ready the funeral pyre will be lit by two persons—one at the head and the other at the foot. During consumption by fire specially prepared food and other offering including betel-nut and Hongang will be made from time to time. The animals in the three places of Hongyat are sacrificed in the name of the deceased so that he or she might rear them in the other world. When the fire is completely extinguished the people attending the funeral will return home.

DETERMINATION OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF THE DEATH CEREMONY OBSERVED

There are two ways through which the success or failure of the observance of the death ceremony can be decided.

At the time of taking out the straw effigy representing the dead person with a view to placing it on the funeral pyre from the decorated Dula, Uchepti or an old woman throws away some small bamboo pipes to all corners in the Tipit. When the cremation is over, she will try her best to find out the pipes. If the pipes vanish themselves, that is to say, if the concerned woman fails to find the pipes out, it is believed that the performance of the death ceremony is quite alright. If, on the other hand, she could



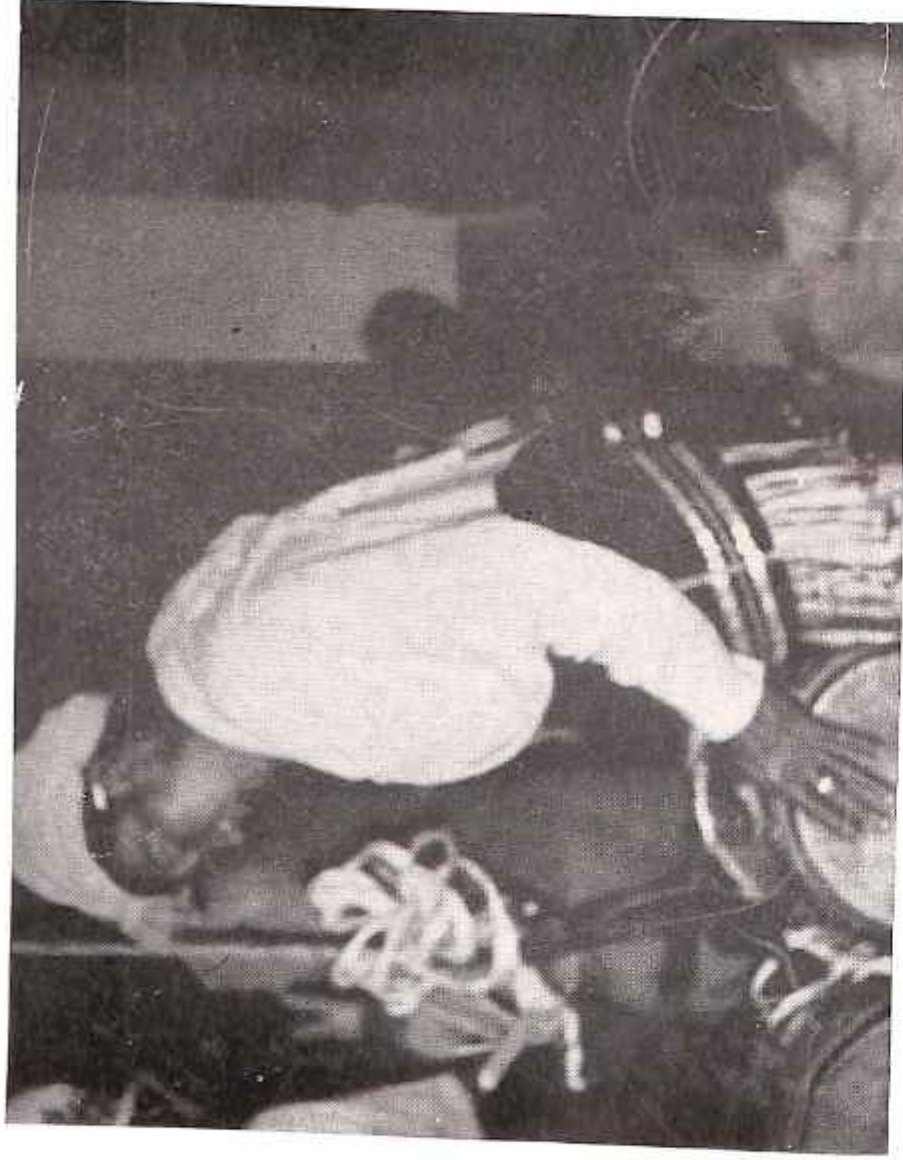
A view of the dance called CHOMPIKEDAM performed by two male dancers in their traditional dramas.



PHAK-OK-KISUK, the ceremonial distribution of SER-AWAN (holy pig meat)



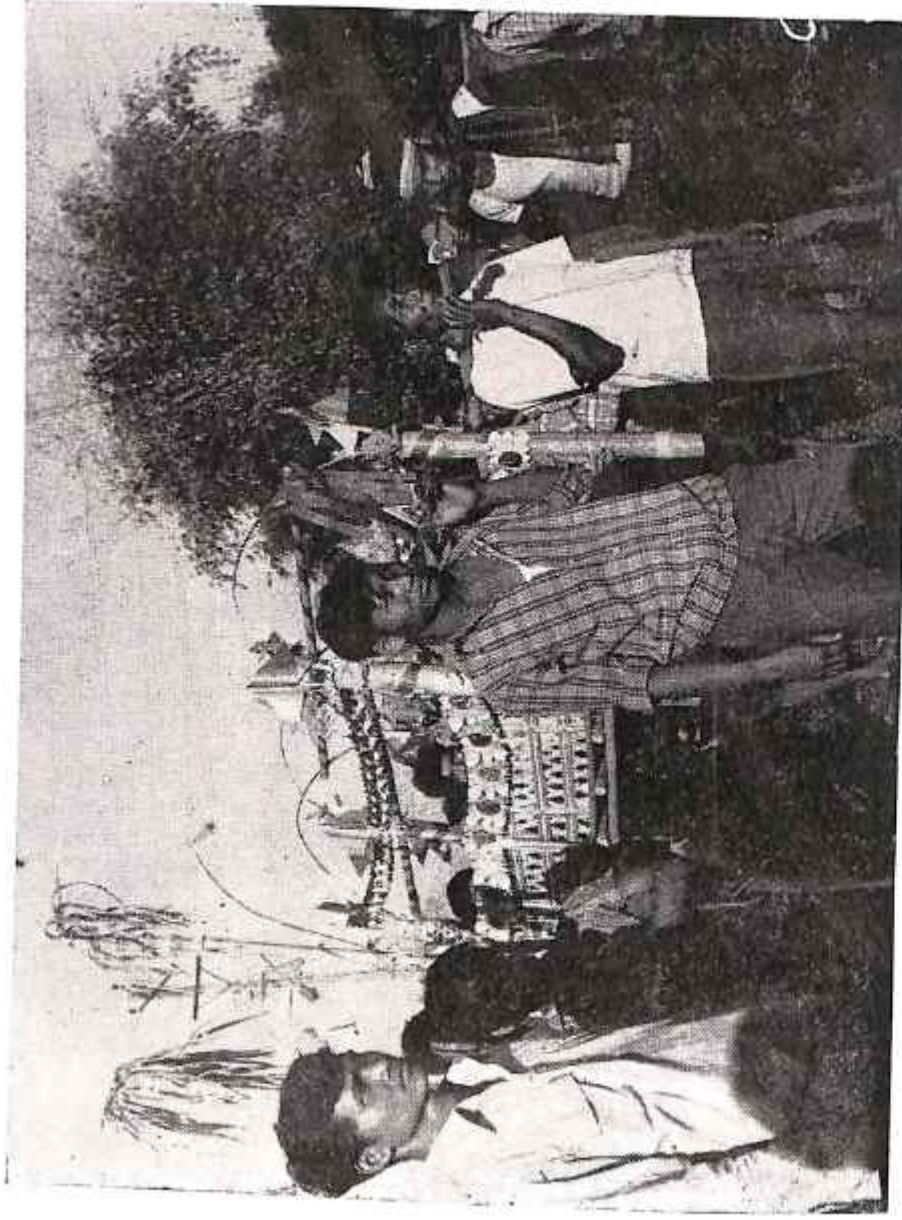
CHOMANGKAN KEKANPI AWOPI—ceremonial invitation to the members of the RISOMAR (youth club) to participate in the dances to be performed subsequently. This ceremony is performed by sacrificing a hen after sun-set on the second day of the death ceremony.



Performance of the ceremony called **HORMU CHARDUNG**—the last farewell drum beating.



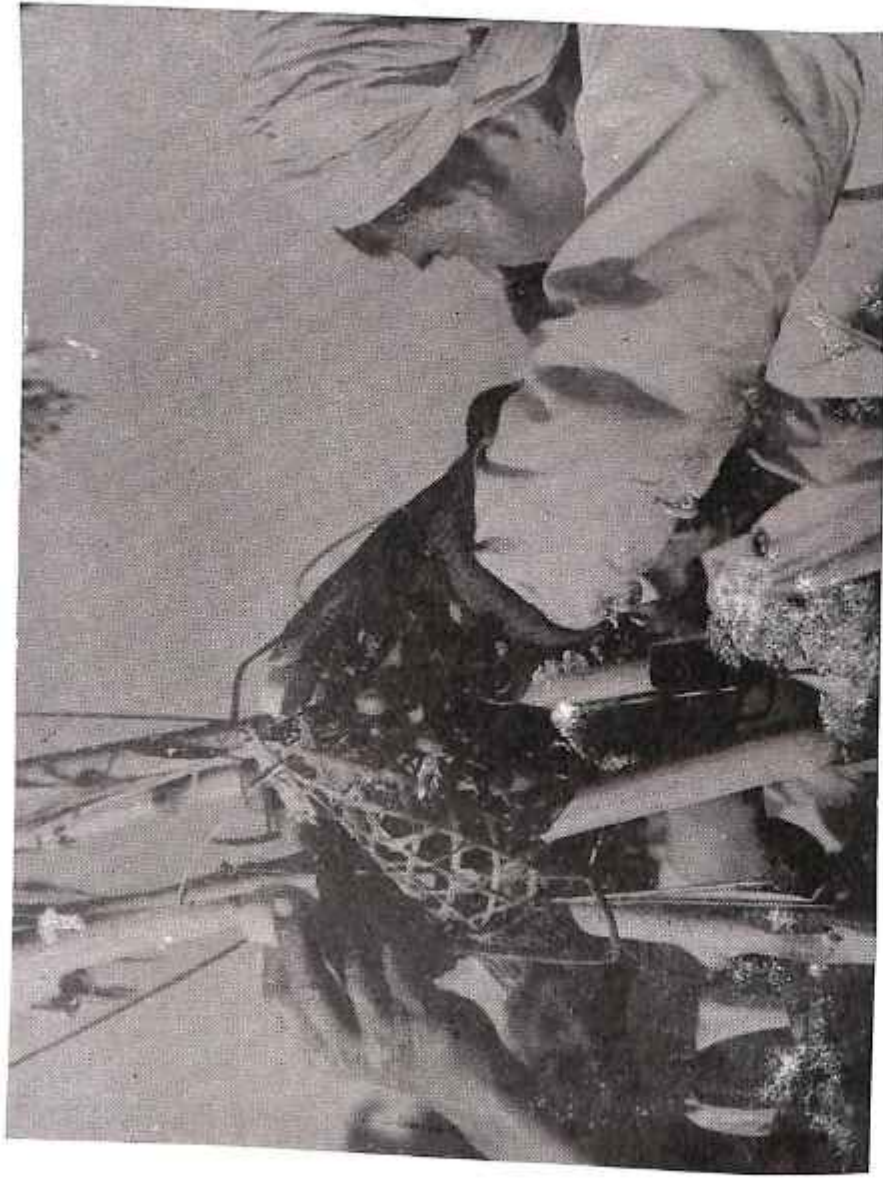
The performance of the dance called **NIMOKERUNG** by groups of tender-aged boys and girls.



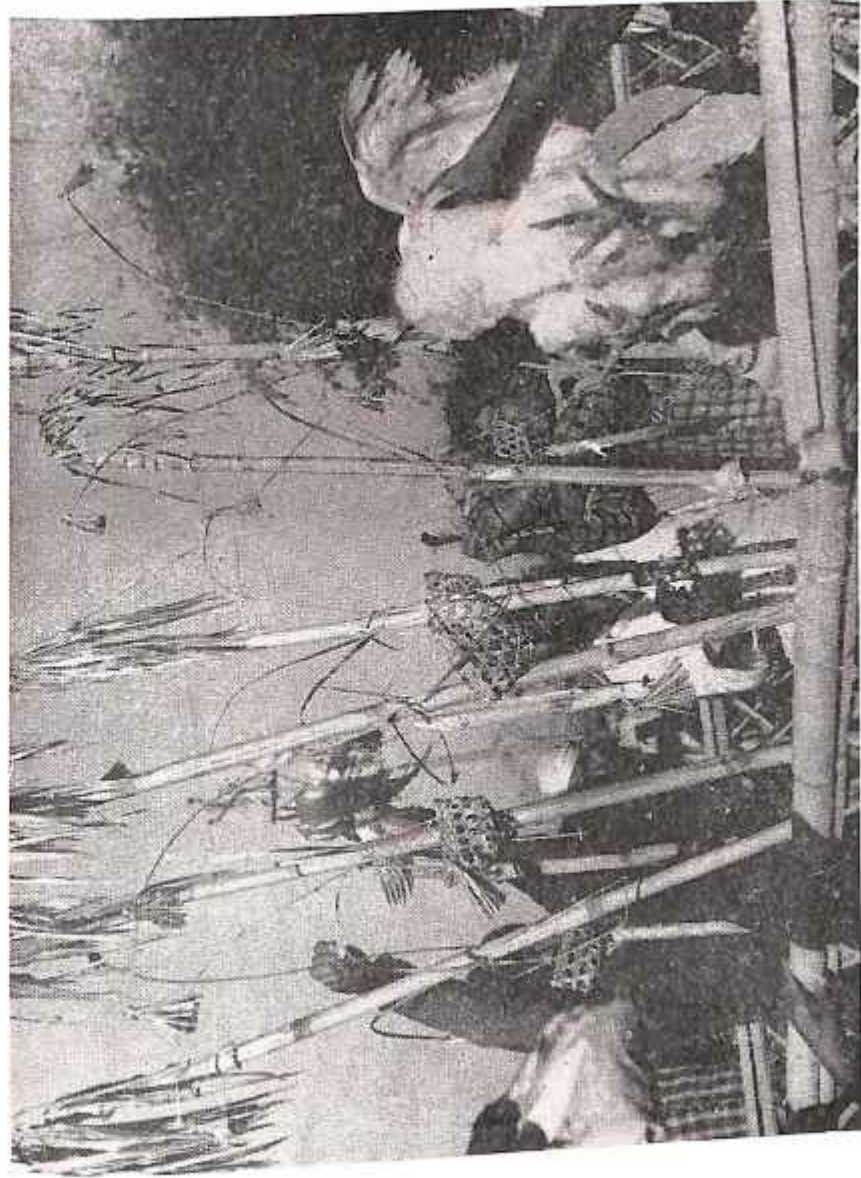
Performance of the ceremony called RONGCHAM KEDAM by the youths of the RISOMAR.



A view of the roasting of the sacrificed cock in connection with the ceremony RONGCHAN
WO KEPHL.



A view of the splitting of eggs into halves in connection with the ceremony RONGCHAM KEDAM.



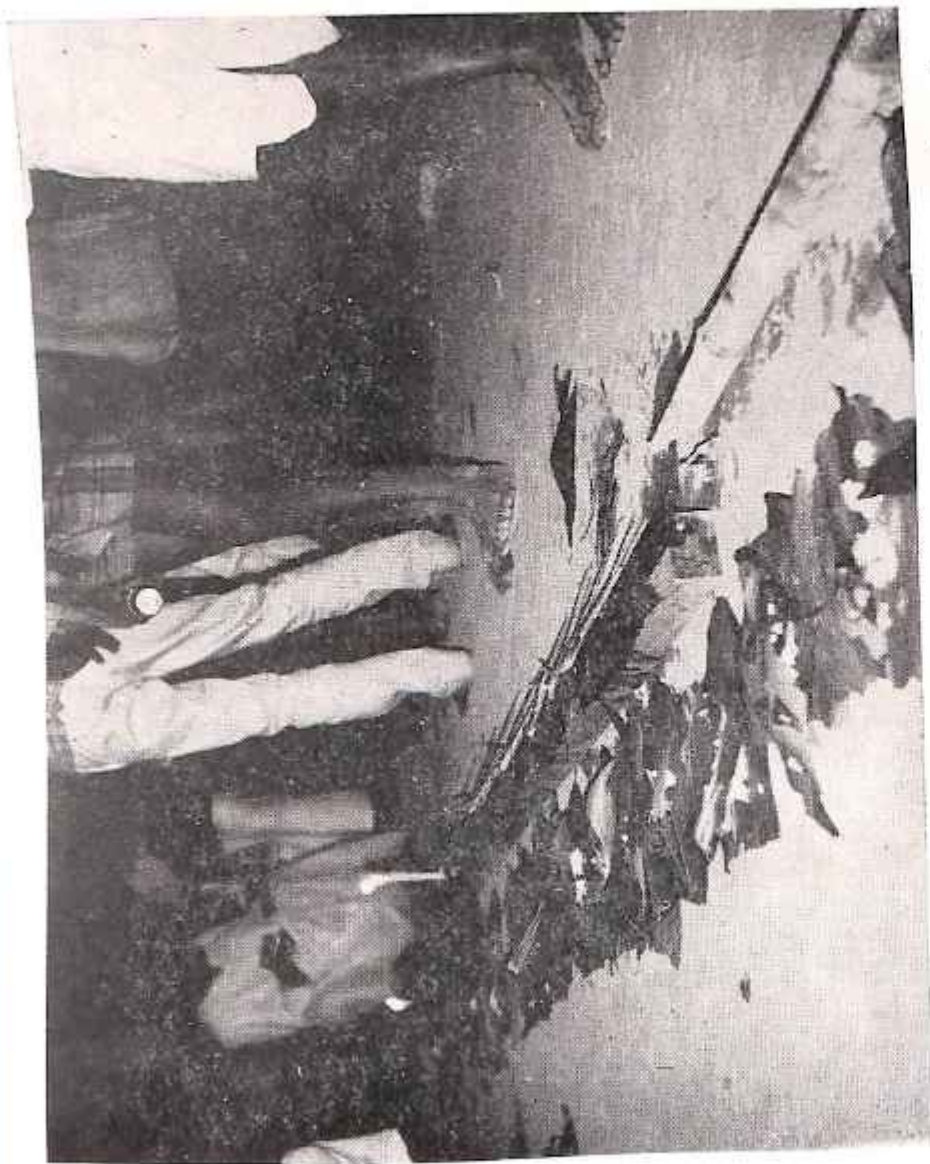
Sacrificing of a cock and smearing its blood on the BANJAR posts in connection with the ceremony RONGCHAM KEDAM.



A view of the performance of the dance BANJAR KEKAN.



Another view of the performance of the dance BANJAR KEKAN.



KA-SOLE, the last ceremonial offering of specially prepared food to the deceased.



ARI-ASAR offering KA-SOLE to the deceased in the inner room where the straw effigy is kept.



BANJAR KEKAN performed by the elderly people.



Starting of the last journey of the deceased. The DULA (bier) with the straw effigy / effigies inside is taken in a procession.



Sacrificing of a she-goat at HONGVAT by the ONG-NIHU (maternal uncle) at the completion of the third round of the procession carrying the Duta.

find them out, it leads to the obvious fact that the ceremony has not been performed duly.

The second method is more interesting. It is as follows :—

While accompanying the procession to the cremation ground, the Uchepi or an old woman will carry a small Bong (an empty gourd) in a cloth wrapper called Pe by tying a knot. In the cremation ground the Pe will be thoroughly checked with a view to finding out if anything is clinging to it. When the funeral ceremony is over, the Pe with the Bong inside will be taken back and hung in the ceiling or in a post without untying the knot. Next morning on a spread bamboo mat the knot of the Pe will be untied and the Bong will be taken out. A few persons will examine thoroughly the Pe and the Bong. If nothing is seen they believe that the observance of the death ceremony is quite perfect and the spirit of the deceased has left the world for good. If, on the otherhand, any foreign material is observed it would mean that the observance of the death ceremony is not quite perfect. From the article or material they will also try to determine the cause of death which might be natural or might be caused by some other elements, viz., evil spirits.

NIHU-CHENGKIE

When the processionists will return to host's house they will have some light refreshment and tea. When it is over another ceremony called Nihu-Chengkie will take place. In this ceremony the Ong-Nihu demands suitable compensation both in cash and kind called Tipul-Saba from his in-laws. The process of demanding compensation by the maternal uncle may continue for hours together. His demand will increase gradually and the in-laws have no other alternative than to fulfil the demands of their maternal uncle. The related maternal uncles belonging to the other Kurs also demand compensation from the in-laws and the in-laws have to pay whatever they demand. Sometimes such demands become not only too heavy but become unreasonable also. Very often the in-laws are turned into paupers. This rite

is perhaps observed with a view to making up for the breach of allegiance between the two families by the death of a person.

NONKER

On the fourth day of the death ceremony *Nonker*, meaning the purifying rite, is performed. During the observance of the death ceremony the family members of the host are considered unclean and impure. Until the performance of *Nonker* they can neither sit and eat with others nor can they work in their fields. During the whole ceremony the courtyards and the inside of the house are not swept at all. These are filled with refuges and lefts-over. It is *Engjir-Arlo*, who will have to sweep the court yards and the rooms of the house and to clean all other things by sprinkling water. As soon as the purifying ceremony is over, the members of the household are considered clean and they can sit and partake food with others.

The *Uchepi* will perform her last task by trying to locate foot prints on the ash kept in an inner room. On the previous day she would cover the ash of the hearth in the inner room with a pot. On this day she will remove the pot from the ash and try to find out whether there is any foot prints on the sand. From this she will deduce conclusion whether the death was a natural one or it was caused by blackmagic or witchcraft.

The host will then see-off his *Ong-Nihu*, *Engjir-Arlo*, *Uchepi*, *Duihudi*, *Sarburas* and other friends and relatives. Each of the important persons like the *Ong-Nihu*, *Engjir-Arlo*, *Uchepi* and the *Duihudi* has to be presented with a bundle of *Chira* (flattend rice) betel-nuts and betel-leaves and a bottle of *Horlang*.

With this the death ceremony so elaborately prepared and performed comes to and end.

ARLENG KARHI OF THE KARBIS AND THE BONE-BURIAL CEREMONY OF THE KHASIS

Here an attempt is made to examine whether there are any resemblances between the death ceremonies observed by the Karbis and the Khasis so that we may arrive at a decisive conclusion in regard to the question whether the death ceremony observed by the Karbis has actually been borrowed from the Khasis.

For our purpose we may divide the ceremonies that are performed for a dead man into two groups. The first group refers to the funeral ceremonies which are performed immediately after the death of a person. The second group refers to the death ceremonies which are performed at a later date according to the convenience of the family concerned. Here we shall confine our discussion with the second group of ceremonies only. It would be rather worthwhile to mention here that when the whole body is consumed by fire in the funeral Pyre in the *Theri* or *Tipit* (cremation ground) it is a custom in the Karbi society to pick up a piece of bone and to bind it with a piece of cloth and then to bury it in a hole in the cremation ground. Later on when the death ceremony is observed for the deceased the piece of bone will be ceremoniously dug out on the first day of the ceremony. It will be taken home and inserted in the belly of a straw-effigy symbolising it as the dead man coming to life. Thereafter the death ceremony spreading over for four days as described in the preceding chapters will be performed.

The Khasis who are still following the traditional religion, cremate the dead bodies like the Karbis. When the dead body is entirely consumed by fire the fire is extinguished by sprinkling water. The relatives then collect the bones which are wrapped in a white piece of cloth and these are then placed inside a *cairu*. If the bones thus collected cannot be placed in a *cairu*, they are taken home after washing them thrice.

At a later date the bones are taken from the cairu or from the house to the foundation house of the ancestral mother or family cromlech. The ceremony observed in this connection is called Bone-Burial ceremony and this may be compared with the death ceremony observed by the Karbis. This bone burial ceremony primarily consists of the transference of the bones from separate cairus to the foundation house of the ancestral mother and from their to the permanent family cromlech of a larger size. Like the death ceremonies of the Karbis this ceremony of the Khasis also continues for three to four days. When at first the remains of the deceased are brought home from the cairu, they are kept in a highly decorated apartment. This is followed by sacrifices of animals and birds and the erection of megalith.

The Karbis also bring the piece of bone of the deceased from the cremation ground to the residence ceremoniously and keep in the inner room of the house. This is followed by the sacrifice of birds and animals.

But the difference between the two systems lies in the fact that while the Khasis bring the remains from the cairu as such, the Karbis insert the piece of bone in the belly of a straw effigy and henceforth this effigy is considered to be the dead man coming to life. While the Khasis keep the remains in the larger family cromlech, at the end of the ceremony, the Karbis cremate the straw effigy with full honour considering the deceased to be dead for the second time. In case of bone-burial ceremony of the Khasis, the megalithic erection takes place. The stone or concrete statue erected in case of the Langtuk or Harne Chomangkan cannot be compared with the megalithic erection of the Khasis because of the fact that in case of the celebration of the Kan Fla Fla Chomangkan the stone or concrete statue is not at all necessary.

Like the observance of the Chomangkan, the bone-burial ceremony of the Khasis is also observed for three to four days. Like Chomangkan the Khasis also perform dances with drums. But these dances are performed in order to

pay respect to the Ka-Meikha (mother) and they do this by bending down their bodies and then by retreating with backward steps. As we have seen earlier, in the performance of the death ceremony by the Karbis, there are no such dances. In the bone-burial ceremony animals donated by the clans are killed first. But in the performance of the Chomangkan all the animals and birds sacrificed are provided by the host. In performing the ceremony the Khasis release a bull with silver decorations on its horns and the absence of this custom in the performance of a Karbi death ceremony is really an important matter to be noted.

At midnight on the first day of the bone-burial ceremony, a ghostly wedding is performed for the deceased and this is followed by chasing off the devils with clubs by the male members. In the observance of Chomangkan also a mock wedding is performed on the first day if deceased had not got himself or herself married in the traditional custom. But there is no chasing away the ghost.

The cremation of the straw offigy during the celebration of the death ceremony observed by the Karbis and the burial of the bone during bone-burial ceremony observed by the Karbis take place on the third day.

From the above analysis it can clearly seen that the death ceremony observed by the Karbis differ fundamentally from that of the bone-burial ceremony observed by the Khasis inspite of the fact that there are slight resemblances here and there. The dances performed have no similarity at all.

The dance called Chomsingnang performed by the Karbis on the third day of the celebration of the Chomangkan has, of course, some resemblance with the Khasi war dance called Pastiech or Mastiech. In both cases a group of dancers dance with shields and swords facing each other brandishing their swords as if they were in a combat. But to name the whole ceremony as Chomangkan on the basis of the performance of a particular dance resembling a Khasi dance out of so many dances performed during the observances of the death ceremony cannot be accepted as a logical one.

CONCLUSION

In the Karbi society no other ceremony observed by them can be compared with the observance of the death ceremony. It is the most elaborate and expensive ceremony where a large number people are involved directly or indirectly throughout the whole period of the observance of the ceremony. The ceremony is primarily based on the philosophy of their traditional religion which asserts the immortality of the soul, existence of a kingdom for the dead, and the journey of the soul to its ultimate resting place, meaning the kingdom for the dead. The performance of the death ceremony facilitates the soul which hitherto has been wandering aimlessly to enter into this kingdom. The worldly belongings must be offered to the deceased so that he or she can lead a peaceful and prosperous life in the other world. In other words, this ceremony can be regarded as a ceremony of ancestor worship. Basically the underlying philosophy of the death ceremony observed by the Karbis does not have much difference with the observance of the death ceremony by the other Hindus in the Vedic way. Dances performed on different occasions in perfect rhythm and joy with systematic drum beatings by the expert drummers, spontaneous participation of so many people with so much pomp and cheerfulness and the performance of so many religious rites day and night all throughout the four days, in fact, make the ceremony a worth-seeing one.

To name such an important ceremony as *Chomangkan* meaning a Khasi dance instead of *Arleng Karhi* where the Khasi dance has got nothing to do is quite a misnomer. Even the bone-burial ceremony of the Khasis has also no basic resemblance with the death ceremony observed by the Karbis.¹ A time has actually come to examine the whole ceremony in toto once again so as to establish it on a firm foundation as a separate entity without having any direct relation with the Khasis. This is the need of the hour.

* 1. Relevant reference in regard to the bone-burial ceremony and other related facts are taken from the book—'The History and culture of the Khasi People, by Dr. Hamlet Bareh, Calcutta—1967.