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## Reflections of colonial modernity: Intellectual tradition among the Karbis of Assam

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### Abstract

The paper deals with the idea of colonial modernity and its role in Mikir Hills of Assam. The intervention of the Christian Missionaries and their educational activities in Mikir Hills during later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the Karbis under the purview of colonial modernity. Within a short span of time, a considerable section of the Karbis adopted Christianity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact Semson Sing Ingti, the architect of 'Karbi Land' also studied in Christian Missionary schools, and was the first person, raised the issue of a separate hill district for the Karbis. In this context this paper is an attempt to explore the role of colonial modernity and its politics could be seen in the post formation of Karbi Anglong district of Assam.

**Keywords:** baptist mission, colonialism, Karbi Anglong, Mikir Hills, missionary education

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### Introduction

The Karbis are formerly known as the 'Mikir' are the major ethnic community of the districts of Karbi Anglong district of Assam. It is worth mentioning that the Karbis, who have been classed as Scheduled Tribe (Hills) by the census of India and occupied an important position among the tribal communities of Assam. They constitute the third largest tribal community in Assam after the Bodos and the Mishings having an autonomous administrative system vested by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Historically the state of Assam has contained four hill districts: the Garo Hills, the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills, and the Mizo Hills. Among these hill districts there has been a fairly well defined pattern of variation in support of autonomy movements. At present there are two hill districts in Assam i.e Karbi Anglong and North Cachar inhabited mainly by the Karbis and the Dimasas-Kacharis respectively. This paper is an attempt to explore a background of intellectual tradition among the Karbis while critically analyzing the role of the colonial modernity.

### Background of Colonial Intervention

For several centuries the valley and hills of northeast India have been exposed to wave of invasion and migration. The colonial administrator, J.B.Fuller <sup>[1]</sup> stated in 1909 that "the province of Assam at the far North-Eastern corner of India is a museum of nationalities". In November 1823, David Scott was appointed as agent to Governor-General of the North East Frontier in addition to his duties as Commissioner of Rangpur. Scott's continue reports of the alarming situation on the frontier convinced the Governor-General in council of the necessity of adopting strong measure to punish and humble the Burmese. Reviewing the encroachments of the Burmese in Arakan, Assam and Cachar, the council adopted a resolution concluding that the activities of Burmese must be regarded as having placed the two countries in a state of actual war. The British declared war against the Burmese in 1824 <sup>[2]</sup> The military defeat of Burmese and the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 led to the renunciation of Burma claim on the territory of Assam, Manipur and their neighboring as well as the cession Terranssaien and Arakan to the British <sup>[3]</sup> Once the organized states in the region were brought under British control, the subordinate of the hill people was a matter of time. Later on all the hills areas including the Mikir Hills (the present day of Karbi Anglong of Assam) were annexed and thus the areas of Northeast India enter the age of politics. In 1826 British established their rule in Assam which was characterized by co-existence of equally strong pocket of 'tribal as well feudal influence with the corresponding ethnic connotation. The divide between the caste- Hindus Assamese society and the non-Assamese indigenous society as such cannot be solely attributed to the British rule. History, if understood in its totality, probably gives us ample evidence to show that ethnic exasperation in Assam is much more rooted in its past, than we are ready to accede <sup>[4]</sup>

There was a difference in the administration of plains and hills. In the hills area, there was minimum administration. There was minimum interference with the power and function of the chiefs, village organization and other local authorities. The British thought that the complicated procedure adopted for the administration of the plain was unsuitable for the hills. In the hills, the administration of justice was simple and direct <sup>[5]</sup> Colonial penetration into Assam and the neighboring hill areas was accompanied by sweeping political, economic and social changes resulting in a spectacular transformation of the region within a very short time.

### Operating Colonial Modernity

The colonial modernity has been traditionally seen as an ideology by which late nineteenth century Europeans institutionalized colonial domination in the name of missionary education, medical facilities, establishing infrastructure facilities for the colonial countries. They advocated colonial modernity as a way of promoting 'good government' and also the project of 'civilizing mission'. The civilizing mission has been traditionally seen as an ideology by which late nineteenth century Europeans rationalized their colonial domination of the rest of 'humankind'. Formulations of this ideology varied widely from those of thinkers or colonial administrators who stressed the internal pacification and political order that European colonization extended to "barbaric" and "savage" peoples suffering from incessant warfare and despotic rule, to those of missionaries and reformers who saw religious conversion and education as the keys to European efforts to "uplift" ignorant and backward peoples <sup>[6]</sup>. Those who advocated colonial expansion as a way of promoting good government, economic improvement, or Christian proselytization agreed that a vast and ever-widening gap had opened between the level of development achieved by western European societies and that attained by any of the other peoples of the globe.

### Intervention of Missionaries

The missionaries work on Karbis began before 1859 but no real development in this field took place until later. The Nagaon Missionaries, especially Bronson, had long been interested in the tribe, members of which often came to Nagaon Bazar. Some Karbi children had even enrolled in the school there. As early as 1854 the Home Board had agreed in the principle to his proposal that one of the Nagaon missionary should be set aside for this work. Unfortunately those were difficult years and no one could be spared. In January, 1857, Bronson and William ward, then a missionary in Guwahati made an exploratory tour of the Mikir Hills. Their report was so encouraging that despite the shortage of missionaries elsewhere the home board in 1859 appointed C.F Tolman Bronson's son in Law. Though Tolman was able to make one tour of the Mikir Hills area in 1859 the heavy responsibilities of the station at Nagaon and deteriorating health did not permit him to do more. Due to recurring bouts of malaria, which he had first picked up in the hills, he was forced to retired from the field in 1861 <sup>[6]</sup>. Nathan Brown in his Journal, *The Baptist Missionary Magazine* <sup>[8]</sup>, wrote:

*The Mikir are the most interesting Tribes in Assam..... and are mild, quite an industrious race. They very much resemble the Karens. We should be glad to make some efforts for their conversion, but it would be folly to attempt to extend our labours, while we are unable even to carry on the mission we have already established among the Assamese.*

From the above statement we can assume that, the Karbi tribe has long been notice by the missionaries and there are possibilities of having more contact with them before 1859, but due to lack of evidence, gaps in between is left in the historical writing of the missionary for the Karbis.

On the whole, it was Miles Bronson who had great burden to reach out to the Karbi and made himself a trail-blazer for other missionaries in the wilds of Karbi Anglong. In his Journal, published in February 1857, he writes:

*"I have taken most interesting excursion, accompanied by ward, over a section of Mikir Hills, where no Missionary, and probably no European, has ever been.... this tour, which I can truly say was the most interesting of my whole missionary Life. The Simple-hearted people (Karbi) seemed ready to welcome us everywhere, and listened eagerly to all we had to say..... which led me devote some effort to preparing an elementary catechism in Mikir, giving them, as Simple as Possible, the outlines of Christianity in their own Tongue".* <sup>[9]</sup>

Since the Mid 1850s, a Young and eloquent Karbi man had been accompanying Bronson and ward on their preaching tour among the Karbis. Records show that later on in 1863 Rev Miles Bronson baptized this first Karbi Christian Rongbong Killing, a Government Mouzadar, at Nagaon, Who became a member of the Nagaon Baptist Church. Perhaps, Bronson deserves on to be called as the father and the architect of all mission activities in Karbi Anglong <sup>[10]</sup> Christian name of Rongbong Killing was given Andrew. He married an Assamese lady who was then a teacher at Christian Patty, Nagaon. His actual place was at Amguri, Nagaon district. It is bordering Karbi Anglong district. Missionaries hope that he would be instrumental to bring many of the Karbi people to Christ, because he was a government Mauzadar and at that time it was a great important post. The Missionaries perused that the Christianity brings discipline and build his character that certainly help them to spread Christianity through his messages <sup>[11]</sup>.

It was in 1911 that ThengkursingIngti (father of Semson Sing Ingti, the founder of Karbi Anglong district), Rongbong Pandit(teacher), Sarbura Ingti, Kat Timung, SuiTerang and others organized themselves to form the present Tika village, with Mohira Ingti as its village headman ( Mohira Ingti also served as the first native pastor of Tika Baptist church). Since Mohira Ingti had no son, his eldest son in law Chandra Timung succeeded his father in law as the headman. As this village had been previously headed by the Ingti clan, the headman ship was later on given to Basa Ingti Kathar (son of Wai Ingti Kathar & Mekri Baron Beypi) as per the customary practice of the Karbis. In 1957. Rev Hutton certified Basa Ingti Kathar "most excellent as a teacher...." he died at the ripe

age of 102 and his eldest son Harlongbi Ingti Kathar (Retd. From Nagaland Civil Service) has succeeded him as the village headman <sup>[12]</sup>.

As soon as Rev. W.R Hutton received the charge of Karbi Anglong work from Rev. O.L Swanson, he started working for the Karbis and he began to learn the Karbi language. So he could translate the Bible into Karbi and published many other books magazines. In 1934, he published Karbi Hymn book and it was published in Karbi. He made extensive tour in the whole Karbi Anglong and sacrificed much of his time and money for the development of the Karbi people. He published a monthly magazine on Christian leadership, which was known as *Christian Kejalin Apuru*, and the Karbi newspaper, called *Birta* was also continue <sup>[13]</sup>.

Rev Hutton, he kept himself always busy in typing out letters and manuscripts. He made three missions centre from where he could go to Karbis and work among them. These are: Nagaon, Furkating and Lumding. At the time he had to travel both to the east and the west of Karbi Anglong. He published the 'Pilgrim's Progress' vol.1 in Karbi in the year 1948 and many tracts and schools books were also published in that year. Rev. Hutton appointed many evangelist and some of the (1) Rev Mongve Ronghang, who was the first ordained minister among the Karbis. Hutton in 1948, (2) Holiram Ingleng, an outstanding evangelist, (3) Bamon Ingti, Who knew how to compose songs knew how to sing, (4) Kangnek Phangcho, (5) Nashen Rengma. Rev Hutton took retirement in 1954 and left India for his country, America in that year <sup>[14]</sup>.

When Rev. Hutton left Karbi Anglong, he gave the charge of Karbi work at hand of Rev. M.J Chance. Since Rev. Chance had many work, he could not do much for Karbis, but he continue to published '*Birta*' and '*Christian Kekan Apuru*'. He was assisted by Sarthe Inghi. Unfortunately Rev. Chance died at Nagaon soon after he took the charge of Karbi Anglong. In 1957, Rev. Chance was succeeded by Rev. K. Savino, an Angami Naga, who was sent by Council of Baptist Church in Northeast India( CBCNEI). He tried to set up the mission to political reason; he had to leave Karbi Anglong and went back to Kohima, Nagaland, in the same years. When the missionaries left in 1957, there were only thirty churches in the eastern Karbi Anglong and so in western Karbi Anglong also. There were several reasons responsible for this low growth of Christianity among the Karbis <sup>[15]</sup>.

It can be understood that the new religion brought modern education through the study and practice of Bible. Christian families and their children thus got the opportunity to know about the developed societies of the world. This also brought about a new perception and change in their outlook toward age-old religion faith and practice and to a considered extent in their day today life <sup>[16]</sup>.

### **Missionary Education**

Another tool of colonial modernity is education especially Missionary based education. As articulately explained by different post-colonial scholars, the western model education served to teach the colonized an interpretation of the past in terms of the colonizers' interests <sup>[17]</sup>. This was especially since the control of knowledge served as a way to retain power in the hands of those who possessed such knowledge, establishing a relationship of authority between educators and educated. According to the Report of 1911, the missionaries decided to entrust Simon to open a Kindergarten school at Tika of Mikir Hills. The first part of November was devoted to securing pupil, and within a month, they secured about thirty. Other had been added making an average attendance of 21. The children started learning and were happy <sup>[18]</sup>. The Missionary Report from 1915 stated that during, 1913-14, the kindergarten school had 65 pupil. As good number of them were girls. One of the girls attended the Nagoan School for one year but preferred to study in Tika. On 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1914, the mission at Tika held an award function when five of the children from the kindergarten with two from the other school, who had examined, received certificates prepared by the missionaries for the occasion. But the impossibility of securing good teacher had limited the progress of the school. Since its beginning, this Kindergarten school has enrolled 74 pupil, of whom 35 were girls. The girls did not attend regularly. Of the 15 pupil in regular attendance, only three were in the boarding. Among the existing number were Goaburas sons, there were also three Mikirs girls in the Nagaon School and Guwahati and several of them were asking to be allowed to go to schools <sup>[19]</sup>. This school was closed due to the absence of Missionary worker. In 1913 there two schools started in the past two years and there were altogether the eight schools with about pupil in total. In 1916, there was a marked tendency toward a digital for better school and systematic education among the Mikirs. The existing schools were, in the main not satisfactory. Still there were some good works done by them. Two pupil were supported by specifics and four by the Government. In the Golaghat Field in 1917 there were 17 schools for the Mikirs which were doing good work. The teacher was also the preacher in addition to teaching. In fact, the one and only purpose of the schools and educational work with the Mission was that they might be centres of Christian influence <sup>[20]</sup>.

The Tika Station had been abandoned due to lack of Missionary personnel. Only the graves at Tika bore silent testimony to sacrificial attempts to reach these people earlier. However, W.R. Hutton and his wife Elsie Chloe Hutton were set aside for the Mikir and in 1926 resided at Furkating to work for both the Mikirs, the Lotha and Rengma Nagas. There were altogether eleven schools including the two Government schools in Mikir Hills with an enrolment of 95 boys and 17 girls. It was still difficult to enthuse the boys and girls to go to school as schools could not be given to every village due to their small number of houses. The teachers were also not trained, most of them having only the village schooling. There were ten Mikir boys in the Furkating station school in 1926. In 1927, Rev. W. R. Hutton visited and examined each pupil in all the schools and discovered that the schools were most sadly in need of trained and earnest teachers. One teacher who received training in the previous year at Jorhat and returned to Tika had showed some differences compared to others. Most of the teachers did not have

the slightest idea how to teach the pupils to reach and take from six month to a year to teach them the ABC. During 1927, two of nine teachers have been discharged for immorality. On the Tika side, they had been able to increase the staff with the help of the churches, but on the Sibsagar side, it had not been so. There were eight schools with an enrolment of 64 boys and 27 girls in 1927 <sup>[21]</sup>.

With regard to education of Mikirs, the Policy of the Missionary to the Mikirs, Rev. W.R Hutton to raise the standard of the schools to the place where the time, there was no Mission school. The number of Mission schools for Mikirs was ten with eleven teachers in 1936 <sup>[22]</sup>. In 1937, a total of 10 schools had been running with an enrolment of 147 boys and 32 girls. Three other schools were also taught by Christian teacher in that year as private schools in the hope that government would take them over. The people at Tika-Christians and non-Christians had joined in building the Mission school house that Missionaries felt that there should be a woman teacher so as to encourage the girls to attend the school. It had been reported in 1938 that there had been 5 to 7 School at different times through the year. One village where there had been a poor pandit many years ago, but in which, there had been no interest for years, had a flourishing school by this time, with two teachers, one was supported by Mikir Association and the other by the Mission. The village headman who was not a Christian had taken an active interest in making the school a success. In 1939, the mission aided 7 schools. Boys in school were 140 and girls 11. At long last, they secured from the government a dispensary for Leprosy and some other diseases at Malasi <sup>[23]</sup>.

The Missionary Report for 1941 mentioned of 4 L.P Schools for the under Golaghat Mission Field. There were 108 total enrolments in these four Mission L.P schools. The Mikirs had a large community scattered all over the places partially educated and quite promising masters in the village schools. In 1944, there were 5 Mikir Schools and one Naga with 116 male pupils and 16 females. The Mikirs on the Sibsagar side were deprived of education because of the closing of the mission school in Golaghat. They had another project to open a M.E school at Diethor as branch of the Jorhat Christian School and they raised already Rs. 5000 for the school. It was reported in 1945 that the Mikir Association had stated a Middle English School and faced hard time in paying the teachers. There were three other village schools with 130 boys and 30 girls. In the report of 1946, the Missionaries opined that the Mikirs seemed to have a real desired for learning. There were many Mikir boys in the Jorhat High School and 17 Mikir girls in Nagaon. The people wanted books and the reading circulation of mission's monthly journal "Birta" went up to 520 copies. It was reported in 1947, that the Mikirs suffered crop failure and had not been able to keep up their associational meetings. Yet many Mikir boys and girls were in school in Jorhat, Golaghat and Nagaon. It was reported in 1949 that out the year, the Mikirs, both Christian and non-Christian had been agitating for more schools, road, wells and the like, for their land and especially the need for a tribal headquarters of their own. In 1950, there were 17 Mikir girls residing in the Girls Christian Hostel and Mission Girls' training School at Nagaon <sup>[24]</sup>.

### **Impact of Colonial Modernity**

The demand for formation of Mikir Hills district (the present day of Karbi Anglong district). during colonial period paved the road for initiation of the idea of Karbi Land for the Karbis (the present day of Karbi Anglong). The Karbi youths, who were educated through the colonial modernity, could see the backwardness of their community in terms of education, health and development. Subsequently, they became conscious of the marginalization and hegemonic subordinations of the colonial modernity. The intervention of the Christian Missionaries also brought the Karbis under the purview of colonial modernity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century <sup>[25]</sup>. Within a short span of time, a considerable section of the Karbis adopted Christianity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, unlike the state of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya of Northeast India, where majority or sometimes the entire population was converted to Christianity, the absolute religious cleansing did not take place among the Karbis or among other tribal communities of the present-day Assam. As such, diverse religious affiliations worked crucially at certain levels in furthering the political discourse of the people.

Semson Sing Ingti, the architect of 'Karbi Land' studied in Christian Missionary schools, who was the first person, raised the issue of a separate district for the Karbis. As a part of Christian Mission, Semson Sing Ingti father shifted from Tika hills of present day west Karbi Anglong to Golaghat where Semson Sing Ingti got his early education in Golaghat Mission School, and did his matriculation from Bezbaruah High School, Golaghat. Later he went to Cotton College and finally completed his Graduation from Murari Chand College of Sylhet in 1933. Once he came back after his higher education, Semson Sing Ingti was appointed as a School Sub-Inspector in Education Department. This service opportunity gave him the scope to know the backward Karbi people living in villages and hills. Visiting different primary schools as a part of his Government duty, he could see the appalling conditions of primary education and economic backwardness of his community. He tried to bring all the Karbis scattered in different places to one geographical space and to form a single political administration so that necessary measures could be taken for the upliftment of the Karbis.

Along with Semson Sing Ingti, a set of other educated class also developed the political consciousness among the Karbis. Some of such individuals during that period were namely Khorsing Terang, Sarsing Teron, Song Bey, Moniram Langneh, David Long Enghi Biren Teron, Harsing Ingti, Chingkan Terang, John Kathar, Bonglong Terang, Biren Teron, etc. This attempt of bringing all the scattered Karbis under a singular political and geographical constellation was the manifestation of imagining themselves as an ethnic community. However a more immediate agenda was to function like a pressure group towards the desired course of development for the people and their places.

The newly emerged political consciousness due to colonial modernity has been reflected in the memorandums that were submitted to the various officials in order to raise Karbi ethnic nationalism. For instance, Semson Sing Ingti and his colleagues welcomed Robert Neil Reid, the Governor of Assam at Mohongdijua Camp, during his visit to upper Assam via Mikir Hills in 1940. There, the delegates led by Semson Sing Ingti submitted the first memorandum to Robert Neil Reid and addressed the issues of Mikir Hills.

With the formation of various political organizations, and the mobilization process got momentum in later times. Such as old Karbi Socio-Political organization namely Karbi Adorbar was formed in the year 1946 at Hawaipur of the Nagaon district. Semson Sing Ingti was nominated as General Secretary and Sarsing Teron Habe became the President of the organization. Right from its inception, Karbi Adorbar was concerned about the problems of Karbis community. It submitted a memorandum on 1st March, 1947 at Lanka to Sir Andrew Claw, the Governor of Assam during his visit to Assam. Some of the important issues highlighted in the memorandum such as necessity of educational, medical, and agricultural facilities and governmental recognition of the Karbi Adorbar. An important issue reflected in the memorandum is the guarantee for a protective administration of the Karbi population that can safeguard their tradition and culture. Karbi Adorbar had also submitted a memorandum to the Bordoloi Committee on 18th May, 1947 where they demanded a separate district for the Karbis. They desired consolidation of the Mikir areas, protection of customs and extension of franchise. On the recommendation of the Bordoloi Committee, the Constitution of India adopted the Provision of Sixth Schedule for the hill population of Northeast India. After India got independence the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district also came into existence as the largest district of Assam covering an area of 4421.12 square kilometers from Nagaon district, 4382.28 square kilometers from Sibsagar district, and 1540 square kilometers from Khasi and Jaintia Hills district. Subsequently the Autonomous District Council formed under the provision of Sixth Schedule on 23rd June 1952.

### Colonialism

The colonial modernity played an important role in the sowing the seeds of the idea of modern Karbi land among the Karbi youths that has been reflected in the present days and became more crystallized. This paper mainly argues that the colonial modernity played an important role in shaping of the present day of Karbi Anglong through the Missionary education and colonial administrative mechanism. The colonial modernity has been traditionally seen as an ideology by which late nineteenth century Europeans institutionalized colonial domination in the name of missionary education and establishing infrastructure facilities. They advocated colonial modernity as a way of promoting good government. The intervention of the Christian Missionaries in the hills of the present day of Karbi Anglong during later decades of the 19th century brought the Karbis under the purview of colonial modernity. Within a short span of time, a considerable section of the Karbis adopted Christianity in the early 20th century. As mentioned, Semson Sing Ingti, the father of modern Karbi land also studied in Christian Missionary schools. However, unlike the state of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya of Northeast India, where majority or sometimes the entire population was converted to Christianity, the absolute religious cleansing did not take place among the Karbis. Though the Karbi's intellectual tradition had been influenced by the colonial modernity but this tradition resisted the ideology of colonialism which could be seen in the contemporary days of Karbi Anglong.

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