

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KARBI AND THE DENSE FOREST ENVIRONMENT: THE ROLE OF THE KENGLONG-PO AND OTHER ENTITIES*

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ABSTRACT

The Karbi are an indigenous community who mainly live in Assam, a state in North-Eastern India. The territory they inhabit includes dense forest, hardly accessible to humans that is said to be populated by different non-human and human-like entities, such as deities, spirits, and a humanoid figure named Kenglong-po. According to Karbi folk narratives, the Kenglong-po is a jointless entity who used to be a Karbi child or man but was abandoned in the jungle and survived there. The narratives regarding the Kenglong-po are today confined to elders and are vanishing from Karbi folklore due to the disappearance of the dense forest environment. The present work outlines the perception and transformation of the forest environment within the Karbi community through analysis of the Kenglong-po and other entities that are said to inhabit the territory of this indigenous group.

KEYWORDS: Karbi community • entities • dense forest • environment • folk narrative

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humans and the environment surrounding them has different articulations. Environment refers to “the world as it exists and takes on meaning” (Ingold 2002: 20) in relation to each living organism – including humans – within it. In other words, the environment exists together with the organisms inhabiting it, all involved in the same developmental process. According to this definition, the environment is a net of relations, but also a *world* where organisms live. We can hence intend the word environment as a both relational and spatial domain that people inhabit, are part of, and interact with. In addition, there can be more than one environment, since different living individuals and groups can inhabit different spaces and interact with the different elements within (ibid.).

Not every environment is perceived, understood, and inhabited to the same degree, and people – as well as every other living organism – need to arrange different strategies of dwelling, according to the environmental context that they are interacting with. This is also true for the Karbi community, on whom the present work focuses.

The Karbi community falls into the category of Indigenous people. This term refers to ethnic groups who have lived for a long and continuous period within a certain territory, but also usually under the rule of a larger and more powerful ethnic group and/or political structure (International Labour Organization 2016).¹

The Karbi live in the Indian state of Assam, in North-Eastern India, a geographical region surrounded by China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The territory of Assam is varied, changing from the plains of the North – where the Brahmaputra River flows – to the hills of the South, where the majority of the Karbi reside in the two districts of East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong.² Both East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong are sited in a hilly territory, bordering respectively the Indian states of Meghalaya and Nagaland. The two districts are not geographically contiguous but were part of the same larger district – formerly named Karbi Anglong – from 1970 to 2016 (Chakravorty 2020: 268). In the present work, when not specified otherwise, we will refer to both territories as Karbi Anglong, following the old denomination for brevity.

The Karbi kinship system is based on clans (*kur*). There are five clans among the Karbi, namely Terang, Inghi, Ingti, Teron, and Timung, each including a different number of subclans. Traditionally, endogamy within each clan is prohibited (Teronpi 2020: 124).

The Karbi groups share belief³ in different kinds of entity. *Entity* refers to any kind of visible or invisible non-human being within the Karbi worldview. The word is also inclusive of many non-human biological organisms, such as animals and plants. Among the entities, it is worth mentioning deities (*arnaam*) and spirits, a category used in the present work to include forest entities (*ingnam-api*), the souls of dead people (*chamburukso*), and other usually non-visible entities.

Most entities among the Karbi inhabit different places and are propitiated by the locals through different rituals. The ritual propitiation of these entities, usually conducted through divination and animal sacrifice, is crucial for people to dwell in the environment. In fact, the coexistence of spirits, deities, and humans in the same place can be detrimental or even harmful to people, who need rituals to establish good rela-

tionships with these non-human entities. Propitiation of local spirits and deities is always needed when a new place is accessed, whether the place is intended to be inhabited or just visited temporarily.

Dharamsing Teron gave an example of spirit harm and propitiation, highlighting the bond between entities and the places that they inhabit, even in situations characterised by environmental degradation.

All spirits are connected to places [...]. In my village community [...] there is a different spirit in every location. Different villages have different spirits [...]. Despite the degradation of the environment, despite the deforestation that is happening, these spirits exist [...].

I will give you one example: in a village with about 100 households children used to get sick at a particular time of the year. Children were brought to hospitals and neighbouring towns to get treatment, but it was expensive for the villagers, so they sought treatment through divination. So, they propitiated a particular spirit, belonging to a small stream almost dried up because of deforestation, but the stream has water during the rainy season, and it's polluted to some degree. So, the divination said that there was a new spirit in the river and, with the sacrifice of a chicken by the household, the sickness could disappear. It was a practice for some years, but after that they decided that the new spirit would have become part of the Rongker pantheon⁴ and worshipped in a specific time of the year. Since then, there is no children's sickness anymore, for [the last] 7–8 years. Despite deforestation, the stream drying up and being polluted, the protector is there. (FM: M. T., 2021)

Both visible and invisible entities appear in Karbi folk narratives, which represent very useful tools to understand how locals imagine and describe these entities and, consequently, the environment that they inhabit or to which they are connected. With the present article, we discuss the Karbi's categorisation of and engagement with the local environments, with a specific focus on the spaces without human settlements. The discussion will be based on analysis of folk narratives and ethnographic discourses revolving around local place-based entities. Among them, we will pay special attention to the Kenglong-po, a humanoid being whose features will help us to articulate the reflection upon the environment and the indigenous worldview of the Karbi people.

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

The present article includes four main sections. The first two introduce the entities and figures that populate Karbi territory. The following two sections explore Karbi definitions of environments that people do not inhabit and the progressive distancing and detachment between humans and the dense forest environment.

The article is based on two stages of research. Michele Tita visited Karbi Anglong in January 2020, where he engaged in participant observation with the Karbi community and scholars, explored the local non-urban settings, and gained awareness of Karbi vernacular beliefs. He also interviewed the Karbi scholar and activist Dharamsing Teron⁵ in September 2021 and in January 2022. English was the language spoken with locals in the field and in both interviews.

Kareng Ronghangpi – a native Karbi scholar – took care of the second stage through ethnographic field research conducted from the 5th to the 16th of February 2022 in the Karbi Anglong district. During her fieldwork, Ronghangpi engaged the locals in conversations and interviews – all conducted in the Karbi language – that she recorded and translated. Despite the physical distance, the two authors were in touch during the fieldwork period via video calls.

After the fieldwork periods, the two authors met in person on several occasions and discussed the collected results and materials. These discussions helped to compare and merge knowledge coming from inside the Karbi indigenous worldview – especially in terms of cosmology and beliefs – with the Western-based academic notions of European scholars. Tita prepared the draft, arranging the structure and the style of the article. Ronghangpi commented on the text, suggesting better terms and expressions, when needed. The authors discussed and revised the writing together in order to achieve a concise and ethnographically accurate text and to avoid misleading notions about the Karbi community.

Due to the novelty of the topic and the lack of information from academic literature, the authors generally relied on first-hand sources (ethnographic interviews) to build the theoretical structure of the article. Through ethnography and conversations with the locals, the authors have explained and described various concepts and entities specific to Karbi people.

THE KARBI PEOPLE AND THEIR FOREST ENTITIES

Most places in Karbi Anglong, and in the whole geographic area where the Karbi reside, are populated by spirits and deities connected to those places, where people propitiate those entities through rituals. If those rituals are not needed, people must still avoid misbehaviour as it can disturb and upset the local spirits.

A personal experience of one of the authors explains this detail. In January 2020 Tita visited Langkvoku waterfalls, 25 kilometres from Diphu, the capital town of the district. Langkvoku waterfalls are sited in an area of forest that is not very dense, with a clearing that people use for picnics and camping. Next to the clearing, there is also a stream with small waterfall, cited in the name of the area. Across the river, there is a spot where the local spirit resides. The presence of a spirit at the Langkvoku waterfalls requires all the visitors to avoid being disrespectful to the spirit by swearing or spitting, and Tita was asked to respect these prescriptions by the locals who accompanied him on the trip. He also heard that spirits and deities need people to pay respect to them through ritual prescriptions and/or ritual propitiations. (FM: M. T., 2020)

Through these ritual prescriptions and propitiations, the Karbi people have established a respectful relationship with their territory and most places within. However, the Karbi do not relate to all the places and environments equally, due to the increased or decreased presence of spirits and deities and the existence of an agreement between people and entities, established through rituals (Teron 2012: 73). For example, the villages and houses where the Karbi live are not regarded and experienced in the same way as less populated or non-inhabited areas, above all the forests. Narratives about entities illustrate this difference and its implications, such as the legend of the origin

and domestication of the protector spirit of the household among the Karbi, named Peng. Teron (ibid.: 72) collected a variant of this legend too:

According to a version of the legend, '*Peng*' was a 'forest entity' or '*ingnam api*' [sic] or a 'malevolent spirit' or '*chekama*' who was looking for an opportunity to have a direct meeting with a certain Karbi man. The spirit would always devour [...] all the fishes caught in a bamboo trap put up by the man in a certain forest stream. The man obviously disappointed and angry at only seeing the fish-scales lying scattered around the trap sans [i.e., without] the fishes thought of a plan to catch the culprit behind the act. But the spirit would always dodge the man. The man was thus forced to keep around the clock vigil on the spirit, and managed to catch it one day. But not before a big fight. The man managed to defeat the mighty entity and forced a submission on the promise that from that day on, it would guard him and his household against all sorts of diseases and evils. The man agreed and took the 'malevolent spirit' to his house and placed him in the main door to act as an eternal sentry.

The legend reveals the distinction between the dimensions of humans and the forest through different lenses. In fact, the nature of the Peng has changed from 1) an untamed wild entity (*ingnam-api*) or a malevolent spirit (*chekama*) living in the forest to 2) a domestic and benign spirit residing in human households. In addition, the physical confrontation with the man that led to the Peng's domestication implies a relationship between the two dimensions of humans and the forest based on conflict.

The same distinction between humans and the forest emerges through the figure of Tisso Jonding. Tales and descriptions from Karbi natives suggest that the Tisso Jonding can occasionally be seen by humans. Karbi native and scholar Robindra Teron (2009: 38–39) describes it as an elusive, yet visible, spirit, and more specifically a shapeshifter that usually appears as humanoid, hairy, and tall. Dharamsing Teron also described the spirit as visible:

Tisso Jonding is a shapeshifting entity because it can suddenly become small, then suddenly become big. And there is this folklore that if you look up [at it] in the sky it will seem as tall as the sky and, if you look down, it will seem a tiny being on the ground, so it can change its shape at will and instantly. (FM: M. T., 2021)

The Karbi have different views regarding the Tisso Jonding when it comes to the relationship between this being and the context of the village and the clans. Some narratives portray the Tisso Jonding – or just Tisso – not as a single entity, but as a whole group of beings, originally not included among the Karbi people but later becoming the 30th subclan of the Ejang clan (alternative name for the Inghi clan), one of the Karbi five clans.

A popular legend accepted by all Karbis states that during a grand meeting of *Ejang* subclans, some *Tisso* showed interest to become Karbis and promised to abjure all hostile activities [...]. After prolonged deliberations a new subclan *Tisso* was created, and the interested *Tisso* were accommodated into the subclan, after observing mandatory rituals associated with conversion of non-Karbis to Karbis. (Teron 2009: 42)

As well as the case of the Peng, this legend shows the inclusion of a forest being in a context more familiar to the Karbi. This process of domestication and the radical change faced by those domesticated spirits reveals the special regard that households and clans have in the Karbi worldview. The Karbi create the conditions for inhabiting the space where they reside through the presence of households, often grouped in villages, with spirits accommodated within. At the same time, the Karbi base their social organisation on the five different clans each divided into multiple subclans, to which all members of this Indigenous community belong (Ramirez 2014: 66). Clans, households, and villages constitute what we might call the anthropic domain of the Karbi, the conceptual and physical space that the Karbi, as human beings, control and inhabit.

This domain is still deeply connected with the rest of the environment and the non-human entities and beings within. However, the human presence and influence in the anthropic domain is neither weak nor accidental, as it happens in different environmental contexts, such as the dense forests that the Karbi claim to be populated by spirits and deities that can be harmful to humans. The narratives about the Tisso Jonding and the Peng illustrated here reveal the presence of an anthropic domain where some entities can be accommodated and integrated in human society, either as part of the clan system or as protectors of the household.

Another being from Karbi folklore, a humanoid entity called Kenglong-po, elucidates the relationship between the anthropic domain of the Karbi and the dense forests of their territory. The word Kenglong-po means 'the one without joints', referring to one of its most distinctive features: the absence of elbows and knees. The Kenglong-po is described as male, hairy – or, alternatively, with a very dark complexion – and oversized.

The Kenglong-po is an elusive but visible entity. It is regarded as a feral being that resembles the cross-cultural category of the wild man (Husband and Gilmore-House 1980; Forth 2007; 2008), which refers to a humanoid figure or a human being living in the wilderness. Due to this resemblance, the Assamese scholars Ujjal Kumar Sarma and Indrani Barpujari (2011: 5) have used the term wild man to describe the Kenglong-po, according to the data that they collected in two Karbi villages close to the Kaziranga National Park in Assam (India):

Khenglong-po [sic] is perceived to be a huge, hairy wild-man [sic] that lives in the forest of Singhason⁶ peak (the highest peak of Karbi Anglong) and has a liking for human flesh. While the younger generation scoffs at such beliefs, nevertheless, they avoid going alone into the forests where he is believed to reside and only venture there in groups.

The purpose of Sarma's and Barpujari's (ibid.) work was to give an overview of the whole Karbi eco-cosmology, therefore they did not focus extensively on the figure of the Kenglong-po. For this reason, the reported description of the entity is brief and barely touches upon its features in Karbi folklore. However, other people – including local storytellers – have described the Kenglong-po in more detail in interviews, legends, or personal experience narratives.

The stories about the Kenglong-po show this figure as aggressive towards some people. However, encounters with the Kenglong-po hardly happen since he resides in dense and almost inaccessible forests. Nevertheless, there is no consensus on the exact place where the Kenglong-po lives, neither is it certain if it is just a single entity or a kind of being that more humanlike individuals belong to. The descriptions of the Kenglong-po reported in the present work do not agree on these details.

A 2019 newspaper article by journalist Nabarun Guha from *The Indian Express* (2019) gives a description of the Kenglong-po, starting with the witnesses of two expert Karbi guides and hunters in May 1992 in the Dhansiri Reserve Forest in Assam. The men who ventured into that reserve could at first see humanlike footprints, “approximately 1–1.5 feet long and 6–7 inches broad” (ibid.) and tracing them for three kilometres they came across a creature that looked like a six-foot-tall ape. Scared by the unexpected encounter, the two witnesses escaped and later reported their personal experience to the elders of their native village, who confirmed to them that the encountered being was the Kenglong-po.

The witnesses then told their personal experience narrative to the Indian Meghalaya-born naturalist Anwaruddin Choudhury, who was working in Karbi Anglong in the early 1990s and decided to include the Kenglong-po in a chapter of his book about the local fauna, *A Naturalist in Karbi Anglong*, published in 1993 and re-edited in 2009. When asking the witnesses, Choudhury (2009 [1993]: 87–95) tried to identify the Kenglong-po as the Himalayan black bear or the African mountain gorilla, although unsuccessfully. Therefore, it is more appropriate to refer to the Kenglong-po as a folkloric figure, rather than as an as-yet undiscovered animal.

In addition to the description included in the newspaper article, narratives about the Kenglong-po collected for the present work describe the being as a male human born within the Teron clan among the Karbi. Dharamsing Teron gave the description of the Kenglong-po reported below:

The Kenglong-po is a creature with no joints, it doesn't have legs or joints, it cannot bend and according to folklore, it cannot lie down and sleep like we humans do, so he sleeps reclining on a big, tall tree, according to the popular Karbi perception. The Kenglong-po is a very strong creature and has a human figure. I haven't found any descriptions, but we are meant to understand that it's a humanoid figure, very fast, very strong, it can eradicate trees, he is a very weird creature. But I have heard that he does not normally harm human beings and lives in the deep forest. I don't know any stories, but people still talk about it. The forest department in Karbi Anglong spent some money to track its existence down. (FM: M. T., 2021)

Despite his self-admitted limited knowledge of stories revolving around the figure of the Kenglong-po, Dharamsing Teron provided interesting insights about it. Teron highlighted his peculiarities – sleeping habits, physical strength and speed, absence of joints – and his relationship with humans, who hardly encounter him as he resides in the deep forest.

A similar description of the Kenglong-po came from Karbi farmer Kamal Ronghang, collected by Karbi scholar The'ang Teron:

So, this tale is about this young Teron fellow, who fell in love with a young woman, and just like the former, even her name was not told, but then she belonged to a Timungpi clan. So, she was known as Timungpi.⁷ This story began with the love affair between this Teron and Timungpi in their adolescence. Soon the news made it to the family members, relatives, and the community. For some reason the family members opposed the union between the Teron and the Timungpi, not out of any taboo but for some reasons unknown. Could be out of a genuine dislike among the clan members. However, at the time of this disagreement, the couple had already conceived a male child. The Timungpi was pregnant with a child out of wedlock, when the clan members of each side showed discontent. Due to brewing family tensions over the agreement of the couple's union, unable to bare the humiliation and injustice, the Teron fled the community.

In shock, the Timungpi was rendered helpless, not knowing what was best she took the child to a higher mountain top where humans did not live. Upon reaching the isolated mountain top, the Timungpi invoked the deity of that mountain and extended her offerings in honour, and then narrated her story of suffering and separation. She pleaded with the mountain deity to take care of her new-born, for whom she would not be able to provide or care for. Hence, she offered the child to the mountain deity and requested the deities [Song *arnaam*, Baang *arnaam*, Longri *arnaam*, Longpat *arnaam*] look after this child. Soon the woman gave birth and left the boy at the mercy of the mountain deity. [...] Since the being was amidst the gods, territorial deities, and protective spirits, it gained god like strengths and abilities.

Later on, when this being took its full form, he was recognised as 'Kenglongpo' [sic] by the Karbi whoever encountered or spotted him while traversing through the mountain where he lived. The Karbi at first were unable to identify this being as it resembled a human in some manner although it lacked human features at the same time. Based on his physical stature, the Karbi called him 'Kenglongpo'. So the legend goes, and this being has ever since roamed the wilderness [*ingnam*] feeding and breathing in the jungles. And it is speculated till this day, that he exists as many would testify. However, the being is rarely seen.

This being, where it lives is not known to humans, but in rare situations humans cross paths with this being. [...] Rare are the sightings of Kenglongpo, though the observation of his feeding habits and locating footprints [...].

On the other note, many elders confirm that people from the Teron Langne clan have a connection with this being. For if a Teron Langne person calls onto Kenglongpo, it is estimated that the being would appear to them. Such an encounter, as we have spoken before, highlights the fact that Kenglongpo and any Teron Langne person are of the same clan origin. The only difference being, Kenglongpo was abandoned in the wilderness [...].

Others have claimed that Kenglongpo can still be found [...] in the mountains of 'Singhason' [...]. Unlike humans, Kenglongpo has no joints, no joints in the legs, hands, arms, except for the hips and the shoulder blades. It is as if, the entire body is made from the same flesh and the same bone. Even though, Kenglongpo has been living in the shadows of the jungles and the wild, it is said that his face has a striking resemblance with the Karbi face. Also, since he was born of a human,

the facial features have some uncanny human resemblance. Not in a perfect sense though. As it was told by the elders. (FM: T. T., 2022)

Another narrative about the Kenglong-po was collected by Kareng Ronghangpi [K] during the interview with an elderly man called Lokhesor Tokbi [L]. Tokbi is the head of the village of Rongjangphong, lives in Diphu, and owns a farm in the nearby village of Bagmari, close to the forests where he claims to have seen the Kenglong-po. The man described the Kenglong-po as a human abandoned in a dense forest, who acquired feral features in his new living space.

L: In ancient times, when the earth was soft, there was a father from the Teron clan. The father was suffering from *si-ih*.⁸ The children did not want to look after him and took him to the forest, where there was such thick and dense jungle that neither small nor big birds could live there. They left the old man in the forest with wrapped rice in leaves and wrapped vegetables in leaves. Then the sons came back home. The father ate the rice and vegetables with nothing left and he started growing hair out of his whole body. Then, because of this situation, the deity⁹ felt pity for this man and kept him alive and, because he was suffering and afflicted by *si-ih*, he lost his limbs and the section of the legs below the knees. But he was alive because of the deity, and he started growing hair. He was taken as a man from the village but since he was left in very dense and thick forest with no sunlight, filled with darkness, because of the sickness he lost his limbs.

This is the story of Kenglong-po, he is from the Teron clan. Because of that he hates the people from the Teron clan. He was tricked by his sons who said that they would have picked him up after leaving him in the forest, but they did not. That's how he became Kenglong-po, he lost his limbs and does not have the bottom part of the legs. That's what I heard from other people. Kenglong-po lost his limbs, remained in the jungle without light and food, fire and water, he started eating leaves because he finished his food and that's how he kept himself alive. He started procreating with wild animals and that's how his offspring was born.

K: Is this entity still alive?

L: Yes, [Kenglong-po] is there, in a very big and dense forest [*ingnampij ajo*] and he has feet like an elephant's [walking as people without joints and limbs]. [...] Terang clan, Timung clan, Ingti clan [...] he does not attack anyone, except for the Teron clan.

K: Did people meet this being?

L: Lots of people have met [him] and, in any case, he chases you along the side of the mountain and he can catch people very fast in plain areas. To escape you should walk on the uphill side in rough areas, cut *pindong*¹⁰ leaves and throw them in front of him.

K: Why do you use *pindong* leaves?

L: When he slips on these leaves he can't get up.

K: Where is your farmhouse?

L: Across the Diphu river, three kilometres from the railway station, towards Bagmari. Now I don't know whether the creature is there or not, but when I used to work there, he was there. One showed itself, he came in the night. In the morning I saw it around the *mendu* [a house to rest in the field] and I saw the footprints.

K: How did the offspring of Kenglong-po evolve?

L: They are all born without limbs. They became entities of the dense forest [*ingnam-api*]. (FM: K. R., 2022a)

Tokbi's and Ronghang's stories are interesting due to the connection with the Karbi clan system. The Kenglong-po, in their words, belongs to the Teron clan, as well as his children in Tokbi's story. Nevertheless, since his children were responsible for his abandonment in the forest, Kenglong-po has developed hatred for his own clan. People from the Teron clan are in fact the ones who should beware the Kenglong-po whenever they venture into the places where he is supposed to reside. Ronghang has also highlighted the connection between the Kenglong-po and the Teron clan, especially the Langne sub-clan, although he did not mention any conflict situation between the clan and the entity.

The Kenglong-po is said not to live exclusively in East Karbi Anglong, but also in the close and less urbanised West Karbi Anglong. An elderly woman [I] from that area shared information about the Kenglong-po with Kareng Ronghangpi [K] during an interview conducted during an informal gathering with other elderly women, not joining the conversation, except for an occasional comment by a second woman [S] among them.

K: Is this creature real? Where does it stay?

I: I don't know where the Kenglong-po stays now, but the creature exists somewhere. His leg is twisted. He was a person once upon a time. When people used to go to the forest in the past, they used to take branches shaped like a Y. They used to take tall branches, carry them on their shoulders and go to the forest. If the Kenglong-po sees you, he will chase and eat you up. You must take these Y-shaped branches and stick them against him to slow him down. Then you must pull the branches away from the Kenglong-po, and as he falls on the ground, you should start to run. And then you can run wherever you want! He eats food such as *henru* and *hanboka*.¹¹ He really likes *hanboka*. If there is *hanboka* or *henru* missing in the forest, then the Kenglong-po is the one who picked them, for sure.

K: Do they have footprints?

I: They don't have humanlike footprints.

S: They have something like an elephant footprint.

I: The smaller toe is in the back of the footprint.

K: How did this person become the Kenglong-po? Is he Karbi?

I: He is Karbi. In the past, he was suffering from *si-ih*, and the people felt disgusted. Because of the *si-ih*, the hands and feet were consumed by the disease. That's why he was left in the deep forest, where there were no people and no houses. The being cannot lay down, cannot sleep in this position. To sleep, he must stand and put his back against a forest tree.

K: Is this being hairy? What's his size?

I: He is not hairy! But he is very dark.

K: Is he an *ingnam-api* [forest entity]?

I: No, he's not. The *ingnam-api* are heavy instead. *ingnam-api* can be seen sometimes, but not very often.

K: Which clan does the Kenglong-po belong to?

I: He has one, but I don't know which. I just know he's Kenglong-po. There are two types of Kenglong-po: *api* (woman) and *alo* (man).

K: So, is there a female Kenglong-po as well?

I: Yes, but it was just him at first. But there must be a female Kenglong-po if there is an offspring. The Kenglong-po also became powerful as a deity, due to the gods feeling pity for him, and that's the same reason why the female Kenglong-po came into being. Kenglong-po drag their feet when they walk. Kenglong-po cannot even jump and if there is an obstacle he cannot slouch to pass and turns the obstacles down with the head or starts to roll [to move forward]. (FM: K. R., 2022b)

The interview is rich in detail concerning the figure of the Kenglong-po. The woman who answered the questions described the Kenglong-po as a voracious and angry creature, living in the forest and feeding himself on plants and occasionally flesh. As in the interview with Tokbi, the Kenglong-po had reached the forest and was abandoned there, even though for different reasons in each of the collected stories. In both cases, the Kenglong-po has been described as a male individual who had received a female partner from a (not specified) local deity and generated an offspring of younger wild humans, all living in the deep forest.

However, there is a significant difference between the two tales, specifically the definition of the Kenglong-po as an entity of the dense forest or, in Karbi language, *ingnam-api*. On the one hand, the Western Karbi elder stated firmly that the Kenglong-po does not fit this definition due to his physical mass (not as "heavy" as the *ingnam-api*) and visibility. On the other hand, Tokbi called the offspring of the Kenglong-po *ingnam-api*, implying a gradual adjustment of the Kenglong-po's lineage of wild humans to the environment of the dense forest. Despite the uncertainty regarding the definition of the Kenglong-po as *ingnam-api*, the relationship between him and the dense forest is often highlighted in the interviewees' narratives. After the abandonment of the first Kenglong-po, according to the elders from West Karbi Anglong, he started to develop typically non-human and beastly features (twisted legs, absence of joints, elephant-like footprints, rolling body) and lose his fully human status ("he was a person once upon a time"). This is a common trope in the narratives regarding the Kenglong-po. All the examples provide explanations for this abandonment, in terms of a disease that led to his marginalisation, or the disruption of a pre-existing familial unity.

In other words, there is a parallel between the Kenglong-po's loss of humanlike features and the non-anthropogenic space where he ends up living. According to the narratives, the dense forest is intended as well-enough separated from the anthropic space of the Karbi not to allow the Kenglong-po to threaten people's health or the kinship system. However, the narratives about the Kenglong-po, alongside the stories about the Peng and the Tisso Jonding in Karbi folklore, suggest that occasional encounters between humans and non-human entities can occur, entailing the possibility to trespass the spatial and relational boundaries between anthropic and non-anthropogenic domains. The next sections will delve into the discussion about the non-anthropogenic environments among the Karbi, and how the locals understand and experience them.

THE NON-ANTHROPIC ENVIRONMENTS AMONG THE KARBI:
(ING)NAM(PI) AND RAM

The presence of wild spirits and the Kenglong-po in Karbi folklore illustrates the way locals name, perceive, experience, and inhabit the environment around them. The Karbi people are used to regarding their households and villages differently from the areas that they do not inhabit and where their presence is reduced. As illustrated above, this is shown through the accommodation of certain spirits in the Karbi anthropic space. These are spirits that might change their name and attitude, such as the Peng, or can be welcomed into the Karbi clan system and live alongside them, such as the Tisso Jonding.

Conversely, in the example of the Kenglong-po, he can be excluded from the space inhabited by humans due to his leprosy-like disease or – in Kamal Ronghang's story – the violation of a social prescription which led to his birth. In both variants of the tale, the Kenglong-po has not just been excluded from the anthropic domain and space but relocated in another specific non-anthropic environment to be isolated from human society.

The environment where he was brought is the dense forest, in the Karbi language called *ingnam*, or the alternative forms *nam*, *namp*i and *ingnamp*i, from now on called simply *(ing)nam(pi)*. Dharamsing Teron and the Western Karbi elder both mentioned the term, and the latter also referred to wild spirits with the compound word *ingnam-api*.

The *(ing)nam(pi)* where the Kenglong-po resides is generally inaccessible to humans. In fact, the *(ing)nam(pi)* is regarded as dense due to its intricate vegetation and the allegedly rich presence of local entities, especially spirits that are considered harmful to people who might venture into the forest (FM: K. R., 2023). For this reason, people can hardly access the area where the Kenglong-po lives and, if they do, they are usually expert forest guides – such as in the case illustrated by *The Indian Express* (Guha 2019) – or hikers. Consequently, meetings between the Kenglong-po and humans are extremely rare, especially outside of the *(ing)nam(pi)*. However, occasional traces of his passage can be found even in areas that are not covered in forests. This is the case of Tokbi, who witnessed the footprints of the entity in his own farm (FM: K. R., 2022a). At the same time, according to the narratives, the Kenglong-po has settled in the dense forest and does not express any will to re-join humans and their society. Rather, the Kenglong-po has become an *ingnam-api*, a dense forest entity that has become accustomed to the environment of the *(ing)nam(pi)* and the beings within – spirits, deities, living physical organisms –, which does not encourage him to leave the forest and look for humans.

The *(ing)nam(pi)* is not the only non-anthropic environment that the Karbi acknowledge. The term *ram* is used to refer to a non-dense, small, non-cultivated, and usually accessible scrubland, where people gather edible plants. The *ram* is also populated by spirits, although not as many as in the *(ing)nam(pi)* and hence easier to address during propitiation rituals. For this reason, people can venture in the *ram* more often and easily, which allows them to access food and resources within that environment (FM: K. R., 2023).

In this sense, it is possible to trace a parallel with the theoretical scheme proposed by the Estonian semiologist Kalevi Kull, who refers to different degrees of nature depending on the pervasiveness of human interaction. Kull (1998: 355) illustrates four differ-

ent types and degrees of nature, from the *absolute wilderness* that humans almost do not relate to, to the natures that are tangible, transformed and interpreted through the lenses of art and science. Similarly, among the Karbi there are different degrees of interaction between people and the surrounding environment, from the anthropic space of the household and village to the more familiar but still non-inhabited *ram* and the unfamiliar, very dense, and almost inaccessible (*ing*)*nam*(*pi*). Non-human entities also have a role in differentiating these degrees, since the presence of spirits is higher and threatening in the dense forest, lower in the *ram*, and reduced and handled by humans in the anthropic space of the household (for example, the Peng).

The low degree of interaction between the Karbi and the (*ing*)*nam*(*pi*) suggests that the dense forest is usually distant from human settlements. However, this did not seem to be the case in the past, as illustrated in the next section.

INCREASED DISTANCE AND DETACHMENT FROM THE (*ING*)*NAM*(*PI*)

Dharamsing Teron pointed out that the (*ing*)*nam*(*pi*), which he translated into English as wilderness, only became distant from houses and villages in recent times, within the past half century, due to increased urbanisation and improved infrastructure. Previously, each household was separated from others by the dense wild areas of (*ing*)*nam*(*pi*) and contacts with forest animals and entities were common. Among these entities, Dharamsing Teron has focused on Tisso Jonding.

For a modern person like me, we are in urbanised areas! For younger people, there is a distinction between wild, forested areas and urban areas and villages. I am not talking about urban areas but within a village. [People] can always find or can always relate to a village, an urban area, a semi-urban area, or a town, even in a deep forest village [...].

As I remember, when I was a kid, in the village where I was born, the distinction between the wilderness and the human settlement would always be [based on the fact] that we have houses and only the boundary of my house is what I will call my house. And [from] the next house to me there would be trees again, we would see forest everywhere. So [the houses] were very confined: in the place where I lived, there would be a little clearing and, beyond that, wilderness [...].

So, these entities and the Karbi settlement would live in the same space. [...] In my house [where my house stays], only that area [the little clearing] would be clear and, beyond that, there would be trees, rich greenery, wild animals, tigers, foxes, deer, and other animals. So, we were living together with those animals, and we were sharing space with different forest entities, like Tisso Jonding [...].

Now, since we don't have any such thing, forest is almost gone, maybe only about 20 or 30 percent of it is left; forest cover is now reducing day by day. Those animals and those entities are also disappearing, and you don't see or hear any such incident of open encounter with Tisso Jonding. So, [...] the *nampi* is gone now, and you don't hear about the Tisso Jonding anymore. (FM: M. T., 2022)

In Teron's words, neither distance between households nor dense forest used to be significant, nor was there any disentanglement between humans and forest animals and entities, despite the danger that they could undoubtedly cause. On the contrary, the distance between the *(ing)nam(pi)* and people's houses and villages was not formerly a distinctive trait for the dense forest. However, distance has increased over time, becoming a relevant aspect of the *(ing)nam(pi)*. As Teron said, the presence of the *(ing)nam(pi)* around each Karbi household – excluding the urban areas like Diphu – was common in the past and implied a relationship between people and this kind of environment based on proximity and coexistence with non-human beings living in the dense forests.

With the gradual expansion of urban areas and the increase in connecting infrastructure, especially roads, the environment of the *(ing)nam(pi)* disappeared almost completely. For this reason, the *(ing)nam(pi)* seems now to be confined to areas that are very distant from the households and villages, and disentanglement between humans and the dense forest has become a solid reality (FM: M. T., 2022).

Interestingly, Teron mentioned the Tisso Jonding but not the Kenglong-po. The reason could be the limited knowledge of the Kenglong-po among the Karbi people today. In the previous interview Dharamsing Teron stated that there are not many stories about the Kenglong-po, "but there might be elders who know more, and I would be happy to hear from them" (FM: M. T., 2021). Considering the expertise of the elders when it comes to the figure of the Kenglong-po and the words of Dharamsing Teron (FM: M. T., 2022) about the disappearance of the *(ing)nam(pi)*, an apparent contradiction arises. Even though the *(ing)nam(pi)* used to be close to the households and surround them, stories about the Kenglong-po refer to him as carried and left in the dense forests that are far from human communities. Since the folklore about the Kenglong-po is today mainly confined to elders, distance from human communities seemed to have been a relevant feature of the *(ing)nam(pi)* in the past too, and not just the result of the gradual disappearance of the dense forests today.

However, this is not necessarily the case. The Kenglong-po, more than the whole forest areas surrounding him, needed to be imagined as distant from human communities and households. The reasons stands in the perceived danger associated with the figure, who was said to harm the humans whom he met or infect them with his leprosy-like disease (FM: K. R. 2022a; 2022b). For these reasons, the Kenglong-po was imagined as a spatially distant figure, regardless of the presence of his environment – the *(ing)nam(pi)* – in areas close to human settlements too.

After the environmental transformations that Karbi territories have undergone, distance from human settlements has become a relevant feature of the *(ing)nam(pi)*. The disappearance of most wild areas and their confinement to specific places, such as Singhason peak or the Kaziranga National Park, both in the Indian state of Assam and close to Karbi settlements (Sarma and Barpujari 2011), has increased the distance between the *(ing)nam(pi)* and the anthropic presence in Karbi territories. The gradual disappearance of folklore related to the Kenglong-po also indicates that the *(ing)nam(pi)* has become less relevant than before in the Karbi worldview, and hence more disengaged from people than in the past.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the article was to discuss the understanding of the different environments experienced and/or encountered by the Karbi Indigenous community in the Indian state of Assam. The article particularly focuses on the *(ing)nam(pi)*, the environment of the dense forest, and its relationship with spaces and places inhabited by the Karbi. In this regard, the role of local entities in understanding the local perception and experience of the environment has been analysed, with a special focus on the humanoid figure named Kenglong-po and further references to the local spirits Peng and Tisso Jonding.

Through analysis of these figures, a common element has emerged in the way the Karbi people perceive their different environments and interact with them. Whereas the accessible areas of *ram* seem not to have a peculiar role in Karbi folklore, the dense forest has been a crucial element of the local worldview. As some Karbi folk narratives suggest, the *(ing)nam(pi)* is the environment where the Peng used to reside as a wild spirit, before being physically confronted and then welcomed into each Karbi household as a tutelar spirit. As further stories tell, Tisso Jonding is also a spirit originally living in the *(ing)nam(pi)*, before being accepted into the Inghi clan. In contrast, folk stories about the Kenglong-po portray him as a human who was forced to move to the *(ing)nam(pi)*, abandoned by his sons, or by his parents, after sickness.

The common element to this belief milieu is the relationship between the environment of the *(ing)nam(pi)* and the anthropic domains and spaces of the Karbi people. As shown in the Karbi folk narratives, the main articulations of the Karbi anthropic domain are the inhabited spaces of the household and/or the village, the familiar and social relationships of the clans and subclans, and the physical features of the human body in terms of health or anatomy. Conversely, the *(ing)nam(pi)* and – to a lesser extent – the *ram* cannot be qualified in the same way as anthropic, due to the absence of humans inhabiting those spaces. Instead of humans, the *(ing)nam(pi)* is populated by forest animals, humanoid entities such as the Kenglong-po, and above all *ingnam-api* (forest spirits), whose presence hinders human settlement.

The Karbi kinship system, based on clans, ceases to make sense in the *(ing)nam(pi)* too. Tisso Jonding becomes part of the Inghi clan only after it is called from the dense forest and joins the Karbi community (Teron 2009: 42). In contrast, the Kenglong-po stops being part of the Teron clan when he is taken to the *(ing)nam(pi)*, where he even develops hostility towards that clan, according to Lokhesor Tokbi's words (FM: K. R., 2022a). Clans are hence a specific feature of the Karbi people and their anthropic domain.

The presence of what we have called anthropic and non-anthropic domains among the Karbi does not imply a strict dichotomy between environments with and without human presence. As illustrated above, through Dharamsing Teron's words (FM: M. T., 2022), the coexistence of the Karbi and non-human beings within forest areas suggests a long-lasting relationship and intertwinement between the anthropic and non-anthropic environments. However, in the specific case of the *(ing)nam(pi)*, its progressive disappearance and increased distance from human settlements have hindered some aspects of the overall relationship between the Karbi and the surrounding environment. The loss of dense forest areas, along with the gradual extinction of the folklore related to

those areas – such as the Kenglong-po narratives – constitutes a significant heritage loss that the Karbi people are currently dealing with, after recent and ongoing processes of urbanisation and landscape transformation.

Nevertheless, the disappearance of the dense forests seems not to have affected the great consideration that the Karbi have towards their own territory and the non-human entities within, especially spirits. The worship and propitiation of spirits in fact enforces the bond between the Karbi and their territory, as Dharamsing Teron explained (FM: M. T., 2021). He described how an epidemic was handled in a Karbi village, specifically, through the propitiation of a spirit inhabiting a stream that was polluted and almost dried up. In fact, as he said “despite the degradation of the environment, despite the deforestation that is happening, these spirits exist [...]. Despite deforestation, the stream drying up and being polluted, the protector is there.” (FM: M. T., 2021)

People within the Karbi community, such as Dharamsing Teron, are aware of the environmental changes that their territory faces. Nonetheless, the connection between them and the environment that they inhabit is strong and could turn out to be useful to cope with critical situations, such as the epidemic in Teron’s account. In this regard, the bond between the Karbi people and their environment (and the entities that inhabit it) is a crucial aspect of the identity of this indigenous community. The disappearance and increased distance of the dense forests did not threaten this relationship, which deserves future research and public interest.

NOTES

1 This definition of Indigenous people is the most synthetic and useful for the purpose of the present work. Scholars and political organisations have defined indigenous people differently according to their diverse theoretical or political aims, although not always coherently (Ingold 2002: 132–134). In the Karbi case, the definition of Indigenous people coexists with the political label of ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal community’ given by the Indian Constitution, which regulates the existence of the Karbi as a scheduled ethnic group living in a certain territory, namely the autonomous districts of East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong.

2 The Karbi people mentioned in the present work are more precisely hill Karbi. In fact, another Karbi community, the plain Karbi, resides outside of the two districts of East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. The plain Karbi live in the North-Eastern Indian states of Meghalaya and Assam, close to the Brahmaputra River. The overall population of both plain and hill Karbi is about 364,000 (Ramirez 2014: 21).

3 We use the word *belief(s)* when referring to its definitions within folkloristics, specifically “cognitively held precepts, propositional statements, ideologically determined practices, interpretations of experience, worldview, habitus, the foundations of narrative, explanations for behaviour or story, a genre of folk expression unto itself, marginalised knowledge, and knowledge’s synonym more generally” (Gatling 2020: 308). Following this definition, the word does not apply to the framework of religion, and an overall discussion about Karbi religion would exceed the scope of the present work. For this reason, we recommend consulting Dharamsing Teron (2012: 58–87) for an extensive overview of Karbi folk religion, with a larger focus on the local entities and propitiation rituals.

4 The Rongker pantheon is the group of deities and spirits worshipped during the Rongker, a ritual performed in every Karbi village once in a year. Every village has a different pantheon of spirits and deities (Dhanaraju and Teron 2020: 15).

5 Born in 1957, Dharamsing Teron lives in Diphu (East Karbi Anglong, Assam, India). He is the director of the Centre for Karbi Studies, an association of scholars who are interested in Karbi culture and folklore, founded in 2015 and based in Diphu. His expertise and knowledge have been immensely useful for the present work, mainly through the interviews.

6 The name of this peak returns in another narrative (FM: T. T., 2022) as the Kenglong-po's living place. However, the other Karbi narrators who mentioned to the Kenglong-po did not refer to the Singhason as his residence, but rather to the more general environment of the (*ing*)*nam(pi)*, the dense forest.

7 The suffix 'pi' among the Karbi denotes a female identity.

8 According to native Karbi people, *si-ih* is a disease akin to leprosy, allegedly contagious and dangerous for people who contract it.

9 Tokbi did not specify which deity he was talking about. However, it must have been a place-related deity of the forest where the Kenglong-po was brought.

10 This is the local name of a plant commonly found in Karbi Anglong. Its scientific name is *Etilingera elatior* (Teronpi et al. 2015: 295).

11 The scientific names for these plants are respectively *Colocasia esculenta* (commonly known as Taro) and *Olax acuminata* (Teronpi et al. 2015: 295–296; Kar and Borthakur 2008: 454).

SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork materials are in the personal archives of the authors. When available, the interviewees' names, profession and/or age at the time of the interview or conversation are reported below.

FM: K. R., 2022a – Kareng Ronghangpi's interview with Lokhesor Tokbi (head of the village of Rongjangphong and farm owner) in Diphu (Karbi Anglong, Assam, India), February 6, 2022.

FM: K. R., 2022b – Kareng Ronghangpi's interview with Karbi locals in Chengbong (West Karbi Anglong, Assam, India), February 11, 2022.

FM: K. R., 2023 – Kareng Ronghangpi's private conversation with Dhansing Rongpi (42 years old, farm worker) in Manja (Karbi Anglong, Assam, India), April 12, 2023.

FM: M. T., 2020 – Michele Tita's private conversation with Karbi locals at the Langkvoku waterfalls (Karbi Anglong, Assam, India), January 18, 2020.

FM: M. T., 2021 – Michele Tita's Zoom interview with Dharamsing Teron (64 years old, independent researcher and director of the Centre for Karbi Studies), September 13, 2021.

FM: M. T., 2022 – Michele Tita's Zoom interview with Dharamsing Teron (64 years old, independent researcher and director of the Centre for Karbi Studies), January 14, 2022.

FM: T. T., 2022 – The'ang Teron's interview with Kamal Ronghang (52 years old, farmer). Teron later shared his translation via private message with Michele Tita and Kareng Ronghangpi, with the consent of the interviewee, June 4, 2022.

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