

Language, Culture, and Translation of the Karbi: A Brief Study

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Abstract—The study of Culture, language, and translation is a world phenomenon, and studying the relationship between them is very important. The relationship between them can be achieved through the process of translation, because in translation, one not only has to translate language but also has to translate culture. So, Translation is both linguistic and cultural activity. Besides this, languages with different culture and the necessity to communicate with the others has made translation the need of the hour. In this paper I will deal with a brief study of the culture and language of the ‘Karbis’ and talk about some barriers in the process of translating the source language(SL) text to that of target language(TL) text.

Index Terms—Jambili athon, culture, chomangkan (death festival), language, lam-lir (refine language), translation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Karbi's are one of the most numerous and homogenous Tibeto- Burman race inhabiting the district of Karbi Anglong in Assam (India). They are believed to have migrated from Mongolia to China, and from China migrated to Tibet, and to Irrawaddy valley in Burma, present day Myanmar. From there, they migrated to the certain portion to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and finally to Socheng. They are formerly known as the ‘Mikirs’ and are known to be the discoverers of Assam. In the Karbi culture the ‘Jambili Athon’ may be regarded as a notable cultural symbol. It is made of a particular tree called the ‘Bengvoi’ (*Wrightia coccinea sims*) bearing red flowers. It consists of a central axis called Athon pi (Athon –branch, pi – large, main) and a whorl of four branches called Aro Athon (branchlet/small), all with beautiful carvings on it and the apices are perched with different species of birds. At the apex of the central axis, that tops the four lateral branches, a local bird known as Vojaru (racked-tailed drongo) is placed and to the apices of lateral branches another local bird named, Vorale (spangled Drongo) is placed. The Karbis regard the vojaru as the king of birds, who is always followed by other birds traditionally referred as atoi –ani (followers) and are compared to ministers and soldiers. The Vojaru is portrayed as the Karbi king, who protects his people symbolized by smaller birds and enjoys peaceful co-existence among themselves. It is also believed that 5 branches of the Jambili Athon refers to the five clans of the Karbis, i.e., Kronjang, Hanjang, Tunjang, Ejang, and Lijang. Jambili Athon is exhibited during a

festival called ‘Chomkan’ and during other special occasions.



Fig. 1. Jambili athon

II. CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND TRANSLATION

A. Culture

Culturally it is very rich and unique. Some of the cultural markers of the Karbis are- Dress, Food, Festivals, Myths, and Language. The Karbis have their traditional dresses, which are artistically designed. There are separate set of dresses for both men and women. The aged men use artistically designed shorts called ‘Choi- angro’ and the shirt used by the young men is called ‘Choi- hongthor’. The men used a loin cloth called Rikong. Women and girls wear Pini- Pekok; Pini is wrapped around the waist and Pekok is used to cover the upper part of the body. An intricately woven waist band with artistic motifs called ‘vamkok’ is also used by every woman.

Food is a distinct marker of culture and cultural identity. The traditional food habit of a Karbi cuisine can be divided into three broad categories- kangmoi or alkaline preparation, kalangdang or boiled and han-thor (sour / acidic preparation). Apart from these there are also some culinary style like-kemung (cooked in bamboo tube), kangthu (wrapped with banana leaves and shoved into hot charcoal (ashes), kephi (roasting), karnu pakreng (frying without oil), and ke-ur (smoking).

There are various festivals among the Karbis but the best known are Chomangkan, Rongker, Cho-jun, Hacha-Kekan etc. Chomangkan is a death festival. It is regarded as central to Karbi culture. It is also known as ‘Karhi’ in Karbi. It is held for the welfare of the spirits of the dead. It is also regarded as the life of the Karbi culture. It is here, that the use of ‘Jambili Athon’ is very important. Without this, the festival is incomplete, or cannot be solemnized. If

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'Chomangkan' is regarded as the life of the Karbi culture, 'Jambili Athon' is its soul.



Fig. 2. Chomangkan

The next festival of significance is 'Rongker'. It is observed annually in the villages. The main purpose of 'Rongker' is to appease the territorial deity for the welfare of the village and to ward off diseases and other natural calamities.

Chojun is the other festival in the Karbis. Literally 'cho-' means 'to eat' and '-jun' means 'to drink'. So 'chojun' is the festival of eating and drinking. It is a ritual associated with ancestor worship. At 'chojun', the following members of the kin are invited –

- Nihu – Maternal Uncle
- So-so Phili – Niece
- Ingjir Arlo – Sister

And without their presence, the festival would be meaningless. Without them, neither 'chojun' nor 'karhi' or 'chomkan' can be performed. In chojun, a three-generation gap of ancestors is maintained, and the following ancestors from the fourth generation are propitiated.

- Phusar- Phisar (Paternal Grand Parents)
- Ongsar- Nisar (Maternal Grand- Parents)
- Loksar- Nisar (Grand Father's Sister and her Husband)
- Phili-Asar – Mu-Asar (Grand Father's Niece and her husband)
- Boche-Asar – Sonse-Asar (Clan elders)
- Rek-Asar – Thai-Asar (Elders from the same village)

'Hacha-kekan' is observed after the harvest of paddy. After harvesting, the people worship 'Longle Ahi:I' (earth's devil). They pray and invoke upon the deity for the protection of the harvest from pests/insects etc. After this ritual, the harvest is carried home. People dance all the way from the 'inglong arit'(plots of land in the hills where farming is done) to their granary with thrashed grains at their back.

The next cultural marker is the myths. Like the festivals, there are also various known myths among the Karbis. Some of the myths are – the creation myth, where it talks about the origin of different things; the orphan myth, the best known is 'Jangreso'; myths of Serdihun, who is believed to have introduced weaving and colors in the Karbis.

B. Language

Linguistically the language of the Karbis belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group. At present, it is spoken in various

parts of Assam in India, and in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, and in Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Karbi is a spoken language, and has no written form. At present the Karbi are using the Roman script. Songs, legends, folktales etc. are passed down to one generation to the other through the oral form. So, oral tradition is very important in the Karbis. A unique feature of the Karbi language is the use of 'Lam-Lir'. It is not a common or everyday language and therefore is not easily understood. 'Lam-Lir' literally means 'a refined language' and it is used metaphorically in liturgical situations.



Fig. 3. Hacha-kekan

C. Translation

Translation plays a very important role in the era of globalization. Many researchers and scholars have defined the term of 'translation' differently. J.C Catford, one of the major contributors to the theory of translation, in his "A Linguistic Theory of Translation" defines it as the replacement of source language text material by equivalent target language material. Since translation deals with relation between languages, he considers translation as a branch of Comparative Linguistics. His theory of translation is a theory of meaning because he gives importance to meaning and spirit in translation. Another significant theorist, Eugene A. Nida, provides a descriptive approach to the translation process. He considers the pragmatic or emotive meaning as the most important factor in transferring the message from the source language to the target language. He also brings a distinction between language and meta language and emphasizes that this distinction is extremely important for the translation.

Peter Newmark, another significant theorist, emphasizes on the two methods of translation, that are – The Communicative Translation, and the Semantic Translation. In the communicative translation, the translator attempts to produce the same effect on the receptors as was produced by the original on the source language readers. In the semantic translation the translator attempts to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the author.

Translation plays a very important role. It is through translation that a minor community, like the Karbi for example, could reach out to the world and showcases their unique culture. It is believed that the first translation from Karbi to English was done by Edward Stack, later edited, stipulated by Charles Lyall, in the book called "The Mikirs". Much development is not seen then in the field of translation. Except that LongkamTeron took the effort of translating the folktale of the Karbis to English, in the book called "Tribal

Folk Tales of Assam (Hills)”, compiled by S.N. Barkataki and edited by Chandra Prasad Saikia. Apart from him no such translated work is seen, and if there is any, it is not published in a book form, or sometime not even published. So, venturing too late in the field of translation, I along with fellow conscious folk tried our hands in the translation work. Here, I would like to take reference from my translated work on the folktale of the “Chum Phang’ok Atomo”, which means “The winter and summer tale” and present some barriers in the process of translating the SL to that of TL. But before that I would like to give a brief outline on the language used in the text –

- In the text, one will find an abundant use of doublets like – monit monor (persons); alongri alongphang (place); kahumri kahumpat (to visit); Songsar bangsar (universe); botor bakan (weather); and many more.
- Repetition of words is used excessively like, kaprek kaprek (different, different); amena amena (own,own); ason ason (things, things).
- Karbi has a unique feature of language called “Lam-lir. So, one will find an extensive used of metaphorical language in the text.

Translating word-for-word is very difficult because equivalence of words is hard to get. Moreover, different languages organize thoughts in different ways, and the thoughts that are expressed in one language cannot be expressed equally well in another language. An example from my translated work (The winter and summer tale) shows this –

- Latum (they)
- Kethekdamlong (saw)
- Ke (is)
- inut (one)
- aphu (head)
- kethom (three)
- kachetongchom (collide together)
- asarpi (old lady)
- aphan (to).

If we translate this, we have sentence like – **“They saw one three headed old lady colliding together”*, and which is wrong at all. Here the meaning of the original SL text is loss when translated to TL text. Again, in sentence like this – *“Asomar(children) asumar(grandchildren) aphan(to) kangton(scold?) ame(the fire) pavanglap(let come) anpin(?)*., the word-for-word translation will be ‘scolding to the children, grandchildren that let the fire comes in’, and which is also totally meaningless. So, word- for- word translation does not work here. It is the sense that needs to be translated. Moreover, there is no equivalent English word for “Kachetongchom, Kangtong, and anpin”. This may be because these are certain cultural based words that are very difficult to translate into another language with a different culture. Besides these, there is no one to one correspondence between one culture and another or one language to another.

In Karbi, the word “Kali, ave” etc. are use to negate words. But sometimes it is use to mean positive thing, like in the following sentence – “Hem (home) kachevang(come back) le

kethek(can) ta(also) kali(no)”, meaning “I wish I could go back home.” But if we translate word by word it will be -**could not come back home*. It is sense-for-sense translation that retains the original meaning but in doing so it actually losses the original flavor of the SL text when translating to TL text, as Karbi language is rich in the use of doublets, repetition of words etc.

So, I would like to propose here the two methods of translation of the theorist Peter Newmark, i.e., the Communicative Translation and the Semantic Translation as “Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow; the exact contextual meaning of the original.” (Newmark 1981:39).

Overall we can say that Karbi has a rich culture of its own. This unique culture can be exposed to the world through the medium of translation. But it is saddening that there is not much translation work. I hope my conscious folk will come up with as many translated work as they can and my paper will help them in doing so.

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