

THE SACRED GROVES OF KARBI ANGLONG - AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: Sacred groves can be defined as patches of virgin forests protected by the local communities due to their socio-religious belief and taboo. Such a location is a sacred dwelling of regional deities and Spirit. The holy groves play a very crucial role in balancing the man-environment relationship. They can be regarded as the repositories of many rare and endangered species of flora and fauna and also maintained the area's ecology. The local indigenous peoples have preserved the sacred forests for many generations for their socio-cultural, belief, economic, ethical, and aesthetic reasons. They are found in different parts of the world, and in India's around 1370 sacred groves have been reported so far. Although researchers have not adequately documented the holy forests of KarbiAnglong, the presence of more than 100 proliferation of sacred groves has been reported from the region till now. In the past, such locations were preserved very strictly. In recent days, many changes have been taken place on the sacred groves because of changing perception, taboo, belief, and other factors. This research's primary aim is to highlight the general information, belief, significance, and conservation of sacred forests by the people in and around the groves.

Keywords: sacred groves, regional deities and Spirit, repository, KarbiAnglong

Introduction:

The traditional Karbi religion is called "Honghari," consisting of multiple deities and Spirit. For them, worshipping nature is considered a way of life as they are very close to nature in terms of livelihood activities and the world of gods, goddesses, deities, and Spirit. The uses of animals and plants by Karbis during the religious occasion showed an intimate relationship between physical and spiritual entities. Some villages of KarbiAnglong have preserved patches of forests, which may be a small or large area dedicated to regional deities and Spirit and called 'Than' in their dialect. Propitiation through sacrificing of animals has performed in such places to please and seek blessing for the wellbeing of the communities. The traditional belief, taboos, and stereotypes make its unique system of nature conservation. In sacred groves, trespassing or any inappropriate activities are strictly prohibited by the community. The customary law also plays an important role in the management and utilization of sacred groves' resources. Such forests are minimal human interference as people often thought inappropriate or misconduct would cause the deities offended and punish them. (Malhotra & et.al, 2001) stated that in India's the traditions of sacred groves are reported from most parts of the country, and approximately 13,270 sacred groves have been documented so far. In this context, the KarbiAnglong district of Assam is predominantly inhabited by many tribal groups and is believed to be a thriving ground of more than 100 proliferating SGs (Saikia, 2006). The importance of sacred groves in Karbis society has been observed from many points of view. They believe sacred groves as the dwelling place of demons and deities, ancestral Spirit, as a storehouse of traditional medicines, ethnobotany. Apart from that, it is very much important from the ecological point of view as such places always rich in flora and fauna species, balancing the ecological system and providing ethics and aesthetic values. The changing attitudes of peoples toward the belief system and pressure over the forest resources have a serious impact on SGs.

Materials and Methodology:

Selection of Study Area: The collection of information about the sacred groves for the present study is carried out in KarbiAnglong, Assam. During the research work, the reports about the sacred groves are mainly collected from the older people of the villager who are more knowledgeable about the groves. The KarbiAnglong district is located between 25°33' N to 26°36' N latitudes and from 92°7' E to 93°54' E longitudes, combining 10434 sq. km. The district is bounded by Nagaland and Golaghat district on the east; Dima Hasao and Jaintia Hills are on the southern side; Nagaon and Morigaon district lies on the north Jaintia and Ribhoi district of Meghalaya on its western side. The river Dhansiri forms the boundary between Golaghat and the state of Nagaland. The river Kopili demarcates the limit with the Dima Hasao district, and the Umiam river forms the border with Meghalaya state. The region genetically belongs to the Shillong plateau of Archaean origin and the Purbanchal hills i.e, the southern part of the eastern Himalayas (M.Taher&P.Ahmed, 2005). The Diphu and Bokajan part of the plateau is giant, accounting for 70.7% then the Hamren plateau, which constitutes about 29.3% of the district's total area. Between the Hamren subdivision and the eastern KarbiAnglong lies the Kopili valley or the Lumding plain and the northern part of the Dima Hasao district. The tribal population predominantly inhabits the region, and Karbi is the single largest tribal group in the district.

Sampling Method and Data Collection: The present work has been carried out based on primary and secondary data collected from the selected sites. The preceding information was gathered through field surveys and personal observation on the sacred groves. Gathering information from the village headman '**Rong Asar**' was the first step to collect the data with a prepared semi-structured questionnaire. Secondly, the data is extracted from the villagers, including both males and female respondents, through a purposive and random sampling method. The study also used a qualitative, mixed-method, ethnographic research approach that includes personal observation, interview, participant's observation, and focus group discussion Weiss (1994), Morgan (1997), Creswell (2003), Bernard (2011.)The study was conducted on the concerned peoples, which they follow animist by religious beliefs and practices. The study was carried out to 360 respondents from the seven sacred groves sites. The secondary data were collected from the existing literature, including government records, documents, books, articles, magazines, journals, etc

Types of Sacred Groves:

Generally, the sacred Groves can be classified into three broad categories depending upon the groves' location.

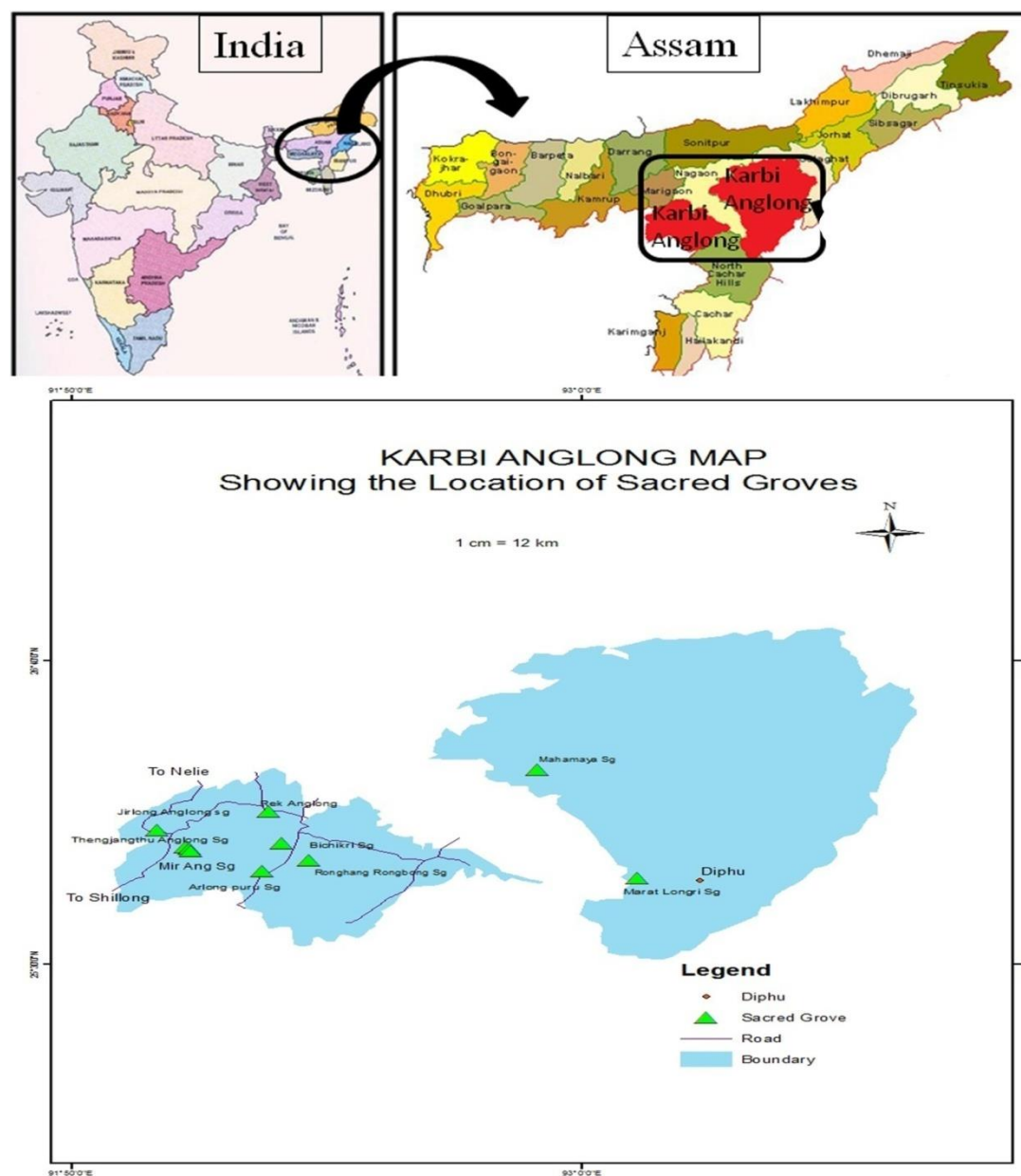
1. **Traditionally Preserved Sacred Groves:** These Sacred Groves are found only in a specific geographical location preserved by the community. Such a grove is maintained within the village's territory, and they believed it as a dwelling of "Than Arnam" (regional deities). Propitiation for that respective deity is being held on such sacred sites through the sacrificing of an animal. They considered such locations very sacred, and trespassing and misconduct within the sacred groves are therefore strictly prohibited by the community. However, in some groves, certain activities are allowed, such as extraction of medicinal plants, propitiation-related plants, vegetables, firewood.
2. **Temples Groves:** The temple groves are mainly found in the Hindu population inhabited. Such groves are created around the temples, and the temple authorities take the responsibility to preserve the groves. As the animist and Christian believer mainly inhabits the region, temple groves are rarely found in the area.
3. **Graveyard Sacred Groves:** These types of sacred groves are found in both Honghari (Karbi Religion) and Christian villages. Such types of groves are located within the village boundary created around the graveyard. They considered the cemetery as the abode of ancestral spirits and ghosts. The religious taboos and perception of the existence of ghosts and evil spirits make the groves untouched by humans until some dead and need to be cremated/buried.

Sacred Groves of the Study Area:

1. **RonghangRongbong or Rong Arak:** The *RonghanRongbong* Sacred groves is located about 16km from the district headquarter, *Hamren*. It is the only documented sacred groves in KarbiAnglong, although large numbers were indicated by Bhattacharjee (2015). The sacred grove is believed to be deeply religious, and any inappropriate activity is not allowed within the area. They used to worship annually to seek blessings and for the well-being of the community.
2. **Rit Asor:** This sacred grove is in *Bathalangso*, and the term *Rit Asor* means the hill deity. It was regarded as the dwelling place of the divinity of Jhum cultivation. The deity is worshipped annually to seek blessings for the better production of crops. Within the sacred grove area, the people strictly prohibited any misconduct because of the fears of the deity angry.
3. **ArlongPuru:** The ArlongPuru sacred grove is located about 4 km from the *Umcheret* village of Hamren. The sacred grove is called ArlongPuru, as the site is scattered with rocks and boulders. The concerned priest was supposed to maintain the sanctity of the area around the place of worship. In this grove, inappropriate activities are strictly prohibited.
4. **Bichikri:** This sacred grove is located at *Bichikri* village in *Chinthong* Block of West KarbiAnglong. The sacred grove is situated on the hilltop, and it is considered a crucial site in Karbi society. The place is strictly prohibited from entering and worshipped annually with the community festival called *BichakriRongker*. The deities are believed to be inhabited in the pond inside the grove. The grove's actual size is not known as none was measured, but approximately it covered over an area of 2.9km².
5. **JirlongAnglong:** This sacred grove is located at the *UmswaiMaikrasa* village. The site is considered very sacred, so any misbehaviour and trespassing are strictly prohibited within it. The sacred grove has about 1.44km² and is located on the eastern slope of the plateau.
6. **Mir Ang:** This sacred grove is in *Chinthong* Block of West KarbiAnglong. The site is considered very sacred, and every year people of this locality offer a prayer for the well-being of the villagers. The locality called this grove, 'the Garden of Mir Ang Deity.'
7. **ThengJangthuAnglong:** The grove is located at the *Rongchek* village in Amri Block of West KarbiAnglong, Assam. The deity of this grove is believed to be very powerful, and therefore the villagers used to offer prayer during the *HavarRongker* festival. The location is scattered with pine trees and rocks, and the locality believed that the deity resided on the rocks.
8. **Inglong Kiri sacred grove:** This sacred grove is located inside the *Marat Longri* Wildlife sanctuary. The Karbi worshiped the deity of *Inglongki* for the wellbeing of their household and the community. People are strictly barring from any unnecessary intrusion into the sacred grove, and they passionately believed that if someone broke the taboo, then the deity will punish them.
9. **Mahamaya Sacred Grove:** This grove is in and around the famous *Mahamaya* temple in the *Samelangso* developmental block. They believed the location was very sacred to the community, and because of this, intrusion and any inappropriate activity are strictly forbidden.

Fig1. Map of the Study Area.

LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA



Importance of Sacred Groves:

1. Ecological Importance of Sacred Groves:

Sacred groves can be termed as 'Storehouse' of flora and fauna, including some rare and endemic species. A rich biodiversity sacred grove plays an essential role in maintaining the ecological process of the environment. The holy groves provide not only direct but indirect benefit also, which flows through ecosystem function. The sacred groves also control the micro-climate of the area, maintain the nutrient cycles, regulate the local hydrological system, maintain the soil's fertility, provide shelter to animals, and add an aesthetic landscape to the area.

Before many decades ago, these sacred groves were very rich in terms of their flora and fauna. However, with time due to increasing anthropological activities, many of the sacred groves are now shrinkage and disturb the ecological system. Sacred groves play a crucial role in balancing the forest's environmental system as such forests are limited to human interference. In India, some of the biodiversity hotspots are located within the sacred groves. The sacred groves provide service to both the environment and human beings. They offer us herbals, medicine, vegetables, ritual related

trees, provides shelter for many animals. Nowadays, most valuable species are rarely found and even extinct in the groves; therefore, some preventive measures should be adopted to preserve the endangered species in the sacred groves. Many scholars from different fields have studied the ecological significance of the sacred groves. Some of the environmental importance of Sacred groves studies include the Floristic composition of the sacred groves in different parts of India by (Chandrashekhara & Sarkar 1998, Tiwari et. al 1998, Basu 2000, Kadamba et.al 2002, Vasat et.al 2001, Tripathi et.al, Jamir and Pandey, Law, Upadhy 2002, Ramayan and Kumar 2003, Khumbongmayum 2004. Several researchers have about the sacred groves found in the Meghalaya (Khiewtan 1986, Khan 1987, Rao 1992, Kheiwatan and Ramakrishna 1993, Tiwari et. al 1998, 1999, Tripathi et.al 2002, Mishra et.al 2004.

Except for **Bichikri**, **Mir Ang**, and **RonghangRongbong** sacred groves in the study area, other groves are not rich in biodiversity. The richness of biodiversity in the sacred groves is directly depending on the location and anthropological interference. The woods with strict rules and regulations for utilization of the resources are likely to become more diverse than the forests of less protection. **Bichikri** sacred grove is rich in biodiversity; the forest is filled with full creepers, trees, grasses, etc.

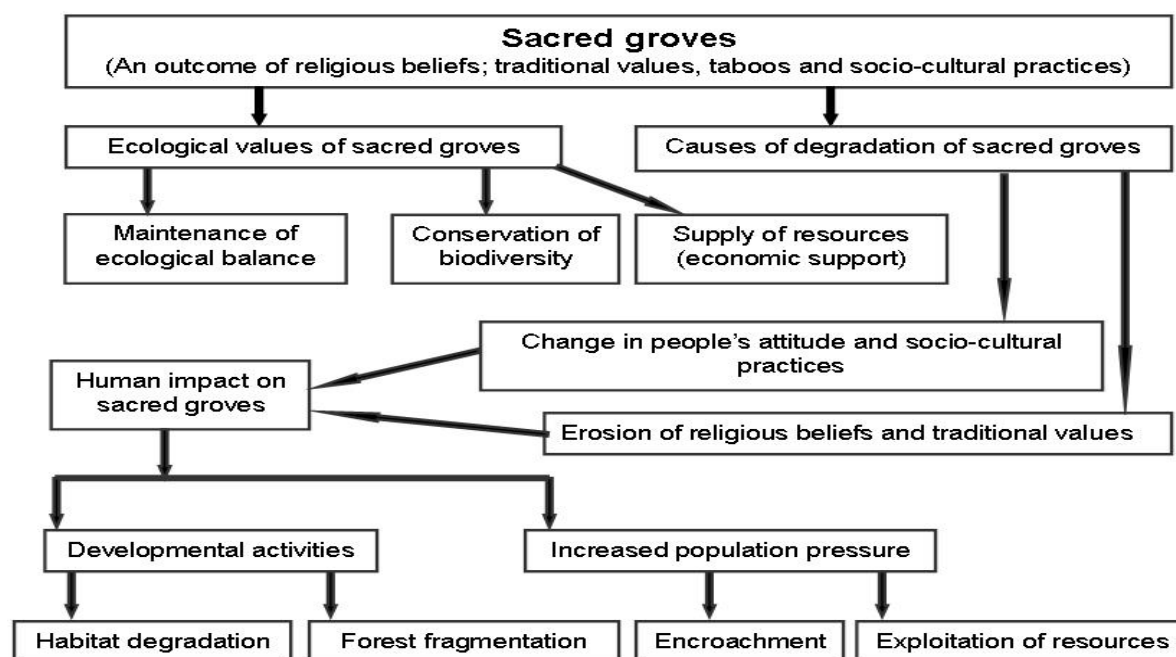
2. Socio-cultural Importance of Sacred Groves:

Apart from the ecological significance, it is socio-culturally very much significant to the Karbi and other community. There is tight bondage between cultures and the sacred groves tradition. The Sacred groves play an essential role in the traditional ritual practice among the Honghari Karbi of North-east India. If we look closely into humanity's history, peoples have been practicing sacred groves' culture since ancient days. Several scholars and researchers have been investigating the importance of sacred groves in different parts of the world. Gadgil and Vartak, 1976, Khiewtan and Rama Krishna 1989, Singh et.al, 1996, Tiwari et.al, 1999, studied the importance of sacred groves in religion, culture of the society, and attitudes of the society toward the sacred groves. Several researchers have emphasized the role of traditional beliefs, taboos, folklore related to the sacred groves. Culture and religion occupied distinct importance in the conservation of sacred forests. According to Singh et.al, 1998, "community and cultural importance of the species is a factor promoting their sustainable utilization as well as conservation. Like other societies, The Karbis also practices worshipping and conserving the sacred groves since time immemorial. The tradition becomes an intricate system in the community as Karbis has been a community of nature worshippers since the ancient days. Many plant species required in Pujas, traditional medicine, traditional totems, vegetables, firewood are extracted from the sacred groves. However, the groves' resource extraction is limited or not allowed in some of the sacred groves. Belief is one of the main factors that make the holy forests tradition unique in Karbi society. There is a strong influence of nature worship in Karbi's society. They believed that the Gods and Goddesses are omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent on any objects in nature, and that belief made them worship the hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, rocks, forests, sun, moon, etc.

IMPACTS ON THE SACRED GROVES:

From the field observation on the sacred groves of KarbiAnglong, the researcher has seen that although the intensity and magnitude are low, all the forests are gradually declining their richness of fauna and flora and witness the shrinkage of the area. The practice of age-old shifting cultivation, encroachment in the groves' vicinity, attitudes of the inhabitants, erosions of their religious belief, and taboos are the major factors for their disappearing. Despite its cultural importance, the present generation's youth pays only a little attention to the conservation of the sacred groves as such tradition is often considered mere superstition. The rule of worshipping the holy woods is not a recent origin, and it has been practiced since time immemorial by our forefathers. The sacred forest serves the socio-cultural importance and provides an ideal condition for the survival of all living beings. Out of the nine (9) sacred groves that I have studied, only **RonhangRongbong**, **RekAnglong**, and **Bichikri** and Marat Longri sacred groves are in a good position. There is an urgent need to protect and preserve from further deterioration of sacred groves in the study area. The people should maintain a traditional system of conservation that will benefit both the nature and the societal needs of its resources. If appropriate measures do not adopt for the preservation, it will not last for a century to vanish completely.

Fig2. Relationships between religious beliefs, traditional values, and causes of sacred groves degradation.



Source: (Adopted from Khumbongmayum et.al, 2004)

Conclusion and Recommendation:

The Karbi people still practice worshiping and protecting the sacred forests, though some changes have been observed over the last few years. The changes are mainly driven by the changing perception, increasing consumerism for better living, and mistrusting their faith. The traditional belief system contributes significantly to conserving the sacred groves. So, the people who lived near the sacred grove should adopt effective measures to protect and preserve until the authorities help protect. The sacred groves act as the remnant and a repository of various endemic, rare, and endangered flora and fauna species, balancing the ecosystem so as biodiversity. They can also no doubt be regarded as the gene pool and 'Lung of the Earth.' Therefore, the youth of the present generation should learn to respect and live with nature.

Suggestion:

From the field observation on the sacred groves of KarbiAnglong, the following recommendation may be useful for the effective conservation of sacred forests.

1. The traditional nature conservation approach should be adopted strictly.
2. Awareness campaign should be organized in each of the sacred groves from time to time with a special focus on conservation.
3. The district authority should conduct research and identify the endemic and endangered species of plants and take a measure to conserve it.
4. The authority should provide some financial assistance to the villagers as a reward for protecting the forests.
5. The already degraded sacred groves should be regenerated.

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