

# Sacred Groves, Cultural Ecosystems and Conservation



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Edited by

Rena Laisram

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0106-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0106-5

*To*  
*Kris Bani*  
*&*  
*Jeevan*



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK for giving me the opportunity to be part of this exciting project. My pleasant experience with CSP at the publication of my book, *Religion in Early Assam: An Archaeological History* (2019) encouraged me to embark on this journey once again. I express my appreciation to the friendly and cooperative staff of CSP for their constant support and help.

This volume would not have been possible without the scholarly contribution of the authors who evinced interest in the theme of the book. I would like to thank each and every one of them for their time and expertise. The overwhelming response has been a motivation to take up the responsibility as a Guest Editor.

My colleagues and students at the Department of History, Gauhati University, Assam, India have contributed to stimulating academic interactions which has encouraged me to explore new fields of research. I am thankful to them.

I remember my loving parents *Ima* (Mom) and *Pabung* (Dad), Rajkumari Kadambini Devi and Laisram Gopal Singh, who have been the best examples of dedication, hard work, and sincerity.

My husband Jeevan, and sons Bani and Kris have always been my greatest strength.

The unprecedented pandemic times which created a global health crisis like never before has had a deep impact on the way we conceive the world. The theme of this book finds immense relevance in the context of biodiversity conservation and Sustainable Development Goals.

This work is a collaborative effort of so many people who have faced the challenges of uncertain times and emerged stronger in their own ways. My deepest gratitude to all of them.

Rena Laisram

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## ABBREVIATIONS

FSI: Forest Survey of India  
GFA: Gumpa Forest Areas  
IJTK: Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge  
ISFR: India State of Forest Report  
ICCA: Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas  
ICOMOS: International Council on Monuments and Sites  
IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature  
NCMM: National Commission for Museums and Monuments  
NEC: North Eastern Council  
NTFP: Non-Timber Forest Products  
SFR: State of Forest Report  
SGS: Sacred Groves  
TFAP: Tanzania Forestry Action Plan–North Pare  
TNA: Tanzania National Archives  
TKS: Traditional Knowledge Systems  
TNT: The Northeast Today  
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
UNDRIP: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples



# INTRODUCTION

RENA LAISRAM

## Concept and Context

Ecosystem degradation represents one of the major global concerns which is threatening human well-being and biodiversity as a whole. Although nature worship has been integral to religious belief systems around the world, forest covers have been shrinking at an alarming rate due to disregard for indigenous cultures and encroachments in the name of development. *Sacred Natural Sites* are part of a broader set of cultural values that different social groups, traditions, beliefs or value systems attach to places and which ‘fulfil humankind’s need to understand, and connect in meaningful ways, to the environment of its origin and to nature’ (Putney 2005, 132). The close relationship between the divine world and the natural environment is traced to Graeco-Roman antiquity which is attested by textual and material evidence (Caroll 2017, 3). The terms *alsos* and *temenos* were used in Greek literature to refer to a terrain set aside for a divinity (Barnett 2007). Natural sacred sites are found in all the continents except Antarctica (Bhagwat and Rutte 2006), Africa and Asia being home to a large number of sacred groves. The size of sacred groves may range from a few trees to dense forests of hundreds of hectares. Here, it is crucial to distinguish between a single tree being regarded as sacred, such as the famous oak of Zeus at Dodona, in north-western Greece (Frazer 1925), and a sacred grove, which refers to a cluster of trees that are close together and accorded sacrality. The type of evidence available includes texts, visual representations, and material remains.

Hughes and Chandran (1998) define sacred groves as...

“.... segments of landscape containing vegetation, life forms and geographical features, delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is expression of an important relationship of humans with the divine or with nature.”

Sacred groves are relatively undisturbed tracks of virgin forests with often very old trees and are categorised according to the deity, shrine, burial or cremation grounds associated with it. In tribal-based societies, sacred groves provide spaces for veneration of ancestors through a chain of rituals. However, irrespective of particular belief systems, sacred sites are recognised as community-based symbols of spiritual and socio-economic values. Myths and taboos have attempted to explain the relation between the spiritual and the human world. A storehouse of biodiversity, such sacred spaces are protected by the communities since their ethnic history is closely connected to it through mythological traditions. Women and men experience sacred space differently and often play contrasting roles within the spaces. It must be noted that most of the world's religions have promoted a patriarchal structure of male authority and female subordination, and the liturgical practices and rituals are performed by male functionaries. However, the Okinawas in Japan offer an example of an indigenous religion where women lead the official mainstream religion of the society (Sered, 1999). Religion's central role in consolidating gender difference and inequality was recognized, explored and critiqued by 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton (*The Woman's Bible*, 1999). Given the enormous influence of religion in human affairs, the continued exclusion of women's roles of religion is bound to reflect negatively on Sustainable Development Goals.

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP, 2007) addresses the protection and recognition of sacred natural sites. There are currently thirty-six biodiversity hotspots worldwide with a unique set of diverse ecosystems that are home to more than 2 billion people. Conservation experts and ecologists have taken increasing interests in these sites, and acknowledged 'the ability of traditional societies to preserve biodiversity through their knowledge and rituals' (L'Homme 1998, 10). The United Nations declared 2010 as *The Year of Biodiversity*, bringing to focus the value of biodiversity and urgent need for action. The two key organisations that play a crucial role in addressing indigenous concerns of such invaluable sites are: *International Union for the Conservation of Nature* (IUCN) working in the field of nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, and *International Council on Monuments and Sites* (ICOMOS) which focuses on the conservation and protection of cultural heritage places. The need to protect sacred groves is agreed upon, but the question is: what urgent steps are being taken by individuals, governmental and non-governmental organisations to safeguard the endangered environment?

## **Conserving Sacred Groves: An Interdisciplinary Approach**

This volume addresses cultural and conservation aspects of sacred groves threatened by habitat loss through an in-depth study of representative samples from Africa and Asia. Based on the long-term research of the contributing authors, the nine chapters reflect a continuous process of redefining the sacred grove within an interdisciplinary framework grounded on existing literature and ethnographic field research. In analysing the various dimensions of the sacred sites, the researchers have also collected information through interview and questionnaire methods. The addition of photographs, tables, and figures have enriched the subject under discussion. Biodiversity hotspots around the globe are homes to culture-specific vegetation, which offers a huge scope for scientific research. The highlight of the discourse is the complex interactions and negotiations between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' - which brings center-stage the subject of sacred status that communities have given to nature.

The book is organised in two parts, viz.,

**Part I: Culture, Nature and the Sacred;**

**Part II: Sacred Ecology and Sustainable Development.**

*Chapter I: Sacred Groves of the Karbis in Religio-Cultural Perspective* by Laxmi Hansepi, examines the centrality of sacred groves in Karbi society and attempts to gain insights into the changing dynamics of interface between nature and culture. It is worthwhile to mention that culture is understood as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The sacred groves of Karbi Anglong district (undivided), located in Assam, India exemplify the role taken by communities in preserving natural resources that are consistent with Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) globally. The Karbis as one of the largest ethnic groups in Assam represent one of the many Indo-Mongoloid groups of people whose worldview centres around ancestor worship. The community shares a close connection with the ecosystem culturally and/or because of livelihood needs. Animistic belief system is manifest in the living tradition which is reinforced through various rituals performed throughout the year. All members of the clans partake the feasts and revive their bonds of kinship. The myths and taboos ensure that the sacred groves are protected and maintained. The study reveals that the community is the major decision maker in management and conservation of

the natural resources. Therefore, the community-conserved areas thrive on a symbiotic relationship between nature and culture.

In **Chapter II: *Ritual Practices and Nature Conservation among the Misings of Assam***, Ripun Doley discusses the Mising religious belief system in the context of ritual observances and conservation of nature. Ritual as a component of culture is crucial to the sustenance of social organisations among ethnic groups. The importance of rituals in religious activities have been explored by anthropologists such as Victor Turner, who defined 'ritual' to mean 'prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having references to belief in mythical beings or powers.' Prescribed ways of carrying on religious acts and procedures, ways of worshipping, praying, chanting, sacrificing, making offerings etc., are practiced in rituals. Ritual is an inevitable component of culture, extending from the large-scale social and political processes to the most intimate aspects of self-experience. The Misings of Assam follow social norms which can be divided into four categories, viz., beliefs, rituals, superstitions, and taboos. Taboo is a ritual prohibition that is rooted in specific cultures. It is through the practise of these customs that the community has helped to maintain the sacred sites as repositories of traditional knowledge systems. The traditional priests also play a key role not only in officiating as priests, but also as healers or medicine - men as the indigenous method of curing diseases has been known to them and handed down from generation to generation.

**Chapter III: *Of Groves and the Goddess: Women, Ecology, and Sacredness*** by Sakti Sekhar Dash, analyses the complex dynamics between human community, religion, socio-cultural beliefs, and ecology. It examines the role of groves and the creation of ecological sacredness which coincides with the emergence of the cults of the *magna mater*, celebrated as the Great Goddess of the Earth.

Rosy Yumnam explores textual knowledge to understand nature and culture in **Chapter IV: *The Tunes from the Sacred Groves: An Ecocritical Reading of Hijan Hirao***. Ecocriticism is one of the crucial recent research trends in the field of cultural and literary studies. The main aim and concern of ecocriticism is to explore the artistic and creative power of literature and to relate it to the environment in the present times. Relatedly, cultural ecology is an approach of ecocriticism which aims to unify various cultures of knowledge across diverse disciplines and sub-disciplines. This chapter seeks to examine the ecocritical elements in *Hijan Hirao*, a folk song of Manipur in North-East India. The framework of cultural ecology is explored



to read the folk song. *Hijan Hirao* is a long narrative poem which is sung on the closing day of the *Lai Haraoba* festival of Manipur. The sacred grove (*umang*) occupies a pertinent place in the religious landscape of the Meitei community of Manipur. Revered deities called the *umang lais* (sylvan deities) are believed to reside in the sacred groves. In the *Lai Haraoba* festival, the *umang lais* are given due respect and homage through various songs, dances and rites and rituals. *Hijan Hirao* is one such song performed during the festival. The sacred song is in the form of a lament of the 'tree parents' for their loving 'tree son.' As ecocritics dwell on the role of conserving ecology through texts, the chapter aims to look at how the tunes of *Hijan Hirao* can inculcate the noble thought of conserving the environment and culture in the minds of the readers. Human culture is considered to be mutually dependent on natural energy cycles and ecological processes, so the implication of culture through the myth narratives of *Hijan Hirao* endears to bring about ecological awareness among the community. Ecocritics espouse the role of nature in texts concerning human culture and nature and how these texts play a critical role in conserving ecology. The tunes of *Hijan Hirao* through its ethical orientation towards nature build a formidable task of preserving and conserving the environment.

**Chapter V: Biodiversity Conservation and Ecosystem Services Provision of Sacred Groves in Africa** by Jonathan C. Onyekwelu, examines the biodiversity, religious and cultural, socio-economic, ecosystem services provision of sacred groves in the context of Africa. It also discusses the potentials of sacred groves in sustaining the provision of their important values in the face of current anthropogenic threats. Sacred grove system evolved through the interactions between indigenous communities and their environments; they act as connecting link between man, nature, horticulturalist heritage, religious and ethnic beliefs. Their success in delivering ecosystems goods and services to communities is hinged on their multifaceted dimensions and functions. Today, sacred groves have become integral part of rural lives and are revered for their religious, cultural, medicinal, social, economic, psychological and educational functions. However, some of these important fulcrums of sacred groves are not only currently threatened, there are evidences that they are being eroded. Given the threats, the extent to which sacred groves would continue to provide their important functions now and in the future is uncertain. Some strategies towards mitigating the threats and repositioning sacred groves have been suggested.

**Chapter VI:** *Capital Conversion Institutions: Sacred Groves in Northern Tanzania* by Michael J. Sheridan, is a Tanzanian case study in which the author argues that ecological, social, political, and cultural dynamics intersect and disconnect over time in African sacred groves. Because “sacredness” is a contested process among unequal social actors, conservation policy for sacred groves should anticipate complexity and focus on adaptive co-management at local, national, and global levels.

**Chapter VII:** *Cultural and Ecological Services from Urban Sacred Green Spaces in Bhubaneswar, India* by Antaryami Pradhan, Alison A. Ormsby, and Madhusmita Samal, analyses the perceptions of visitors regarding provisioning of cultural ecosystem services in the urban sacred green spaces in Bhubaneswar, India. Urban green spaces have particular values because they offer the benefits of ecological and cultural services to city dwellers and visitors. The green spaces in cities are at risk due to rapid urbanization and conversion into built areas. Past researches have documented the importance of green spaces in urban areas. However, limited studies exist that measure the value of urban sacred green spaces in provisioning of cultural ecosystem services. An interview was conducted with 325 individuals visiting the sacred green spaces of Bhubaneswar and they were asked about their perceived benefits from and purposes for use of these spaces. Approximately one third of the respondents identified religious purpose as their cause of visit because of the cultural significance of the site. The second largest purpose for visiting the sites was for health benefits and physical activities, such as yoga, walking, or exercise, and mentioned by 31.5 percent of respondents. The main perceived benefit from the sites was recreation, identified by 45 percent of the interviewees. Despite identified benefits, there is an increasing concern among visitors regarding the planning and management of these sites for better provisioning of their ecological and cultural services. The result of this study has the potential to influence management to improve the benefits received by visitors of the sites and to inform city planners for establishment of future green areas, particularly in sacred spaces, understanding that there are many reasons that people visit these sites.

Parismita Borah examines the sacred groves of Meghalaya as a repository of flora and fauna in **Chapter VIII:** *Safeguarding Sacred Groves in Meghalaya: Issues and Challenges*. It attempts to analyse the issues and challenges faced by sacred groves to safeguard the threatened ecosystem. It will also gain insights into the role played by the government for biodiversity conservation and management of the forests in the state. The priests or *lyngdohs* have been given the responsibility by the district

councils of the state to nurture and preserve the sacred natural sites. This is an encouraging step as the partnerships of the government and local specialists is a positive way to share knowledge and expertise for the common cause of safeguarding the ecosystem. An important dimension of the discussion is the role of women in the sustenance of the rich ecosystem which is quite uncommon in other parts of India or across the globe. This is on account of the matrilineal system and implications of gender role prevalent among the major ethnic groups in Meghalaya. It may be mentioned that sacred groves in general prohibit women from entering for rituals and other purposes as they are considered impure. Women and the sacred groves of Meghalaya is a topic that must be explored further in future researches.

**Chapter IX:** *From Sacred to Secular: Sacred Groves of Northeast India in Transition* by Meeta Deka, deals with the concept of ‘sacred groves’ which varies the world over as it is borne out of diverse historical, ecological, economic, socio-cultural and even political factors that shape a particular culture. This essay traces how the so-called sacred groves of Northeast India, known by diverse indigenous names, acquire newer dimension through various phases of history and hence are not static in time, space and meaning. The connotation of the term has been in a constant state of flux. This essay argues against a spiritual or religious foundation as the basis of what is ‘sacred’ but which evolves into a sacred space subsequently. It was undermined under British cultural hegemony and soon became a site for economic exploitation, while post-Independent Northeast India saw a spurt of ethnic movements in the late twentieth century when sacred groves became an integral part of ‘shared pasts’ in asserting ethnic identity. In the twenty-first century and after, with growing concern for global warming, sacred groves of Northeast India assumed the status of a symbol of conservation of biodiversity and ecology and a tourist destination!

The volume titled, *Sacred Groves, Cultural Ecosystems and Conservation* addresses a subject of increasing contemporary relevance as ecosystems are being depleted at an alarming rate worldwide. The purpose of this collection of essays is to bring together different perspectives on sacred groves in the context of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of biodiversity conservation. In offering an experience of sacred natural sites in varied cultural contexts of Africa and Asia, it raises a common concern for natural resource management. It may be noted that a scientific understanding of harmony and co-existence of religion and environment will go a long way towards a sustainable ecological balance. As Rappaport (1999) aptly remarks: ‘Humanity’ s task today is to assume responsibility for life as a whole on

this planet and religion, the synthesis of objective law and subjective meaning, is indispensable to that end.’

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## **PART-I**

# **CULTURE, NATURE AND THE SACRED**

# CHAPTER I

## SACRED GROVES OF THE KARBIS IN RELIGIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

LAXMI HANSEPI

India is recognised as one of the thirty-six biodiversity hotspots worldwide, being host to highly endangered eco-regions that are severely threatened by habitat loss and other human activities (1). The Indo-Burma region, one of the largest hotspots, covers Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos PDR and also includes the Gangetic plains, areas around the Brahmaputra River and parts of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It is important to note that ethnic communities worldwide are mostly found to have preserved a range of natural habitats of sacred importance in the name of religion or culture (Hughes and Chandran 1998). As such, sacred groves represent a vital gene pool which promotes the conservation of many endangered species on the verge of extinction (Gadgil and Vartak 1976). They exist in all parts of the world under different names and are found in countries like Ghana, Japan, Morocco, Ethiopia etc. A subject of immense interest to anthropologists, biologists, social scientists, and policy-makers etc., sacred groves as communally protected forest fragments may range from groves with conspicuous presence, in terms of expanse, economic importance of specific species etc. to small groves (mostly < 1 ha) of local landscapes (Ray and Ramachandra 2012).

The sacred groves of Northeast India are spread across the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Sikkim. It has a rich forest cover of more than 60% of the total area of the region, and comes under the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. Largely inhabited by Indo-Mongoloid group of people, they have a close relation with nature through the religious belief systems (Kandari et al. 2014). The ethnic communities are dependent on the forest resources for their livelihood and, therefore, attach religio-cultural significance to the sacred sites (Devi et al. 2017). There are two hundred and thirty-two sacred groves in Assam with the highest number, of



forty-two, recorded in Tinsukia district. The undivided Karbi Anglong district (2) has seven sacred groves (*thans*). However, only *Ronghang Rongbong*, located in Hamren sub-division in the present-day West Karbi Anglong district has been documented so far. Apart from the Karbis (3) who form the major group, the social demography of the district also includes the Garos, Tiwas, and Dimasas. The Karbis also reside in other places in Assam such as West Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills, Kamrup Metropolitan, Kamrup Rural, Morigaon, Nagaon, and Sonitpur.

## Objectives

The sacred groves of India are examples of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) that are consistent with ICCAs globally (Berkes 2007). As with the Karbis of Assam, the community shares a close connection with the ecosystem culturally and/or because of livelihood needs. In this context, the community is the major decision maker in management and conservation and may even enforce regulations (Pathak et al. 2004). The Community Conserved Areas thrive on a symbiotic relationship between nature and culture. It is worthwhile to mention that culture may be understood as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor 1871). This study attempts to examine the centrality of sacred groves in Karbi society and gain insights into the changing dynamics of interface between nature and culture.

## Study Area

The universe of study is Karbi Anglong district (undivided) in Assam with a total area of 10,434 sq. kms, and having a topography which includes hilly terrains, and numerous rivers. It may be noted that West Karbi Anglong district was carved out of the undivided Karbi Anglong district in 2016, and today there are two districts, viz., Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. The physiography is divided between hills and plains, and as 85 % of the district is covered by hills, it is referred to as a Hill District. Some important rivers of the district include Kopili, Amrenge, Borpani, Kolioni, Dhansiri, Dikharu, Longnit etc. The district is situated in the central part of Assam and shares borders with Nagaland state and Golaghat district in the East and Hojai district in the West. The South is bounded by Golaghat and Nagaon district, whereas North Cachar Hills and Nagaland state share their boundary in the North.

## Sacred Natural Sites

*Sacred Natural Sites* (Verschuuren 2010, 2) are part of a broader set of cultural values that different social groups, traditions, beliefs or value systems attach to places. The people who hold these places to be sacred believe them to be occupied or constituted by spirits or deities which have supernatural powers, such as that of curing illness or bring rain. In Japan, for example, the sacred mountains are believed to be an embodiment of *kami* (Shinto spirits or gods). According to the *International Union for Conservation of Nature*, sacred groves, a form of nature worship, are considered as Sacred Natural Sites. (Ray n.d.). The origin of sacred groves in India were associated with hunting-gathering societies (4). However, scholars believe that with the advent of agriculture, patches of forests came to be set aside for cultivation and sacred values attributed to them (Negi 2005). Ecologically, sacred groves help preserve soil and water apart from protecting biological biodiversity. Hunting, cutting of trees and plants, and entering the site are generally prohibited, the natural ecosystem is protected. These sacred groves also help preserve age-old customs and traditions, beliefs, and practices that otherwise would have been lost in this age where globalization has threatened many indigenous beliefs and practices (Hughes and Swan 1986).

Malhotra et al. (2001) stated that in India, the tradition of Sacred Groves is reported from most parts of the country, and approximately 13,270 sacred groves have been documented so far. Sacred Groves are classified into three broad divisions (Ray and Ramachandra 2010; Roy 1998) which are as follows:

1. *Traditional Sacred Groves*, where the territorial deity is revered and are represented by an elementary symbol. Traditional groves have higher repository of reserved areas.
2. *Temple Groves* are located around the temple premise and conserved by the devotees. Temple groves have sacred plants species which could be age-old tree species historically and mythically linked with the epics, gods and goddesses. In temple groves, the leaves, fruits, and flowers are considered sacred and are offered to the deity. Interestingly, these plants are considered sacred by the local communities, who view them as incarnations of the gods and goddesses they worship. Sacrificial elements are observed widely in temple groves dedicated to a female deity.
3. *Burial Groves* are located around the burial ground and are preserved because of their beliefs.

The highest number of sacred groves in India are temple groves, followed by traditional and burial groves. However, traditional groves record higher conservation status. In India, most sacred groves are reported from regions like Western ghats, Central India, and North-Eastern India (Gadgil and Vartak 1976). Literary sources of ancient India are replete with stories and myths of the opulence of resources, viz., flora and fauna in forest areas. *Rishis* and *sages* live in the forests for meditation away from the hustle of everyday life (Malhotra 2001, Pungetti et al. 2012). Even texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* mentions many rivers, mountains, and sacred forests with descriptions reflecting the importance of nature. There has always existed a symbiotic relationship between man and nature.

### Karbi Religion and Culture

The traditional religious philosophy of the Karbis is based on polytheism, animism and ancestor worship. With the influence of Hinduism in the past few decades, they have come to follow the essence of both the religions (5). The spiritual and moral values of the Karbis are reflected vibrantly in their folklore and traditions. The Karbis view the natural environment as the abode of spirits. Thus, every aspect of nature is holy. The Karbis have always believed in the concept of *Arnām Keso*, that is, harmony with nature. According to the *Census of India: 2011* (6), the percentage of the Hindus in Karbi Anglong is recorded as constituting 80.10% of the total Karbi population. The centrality of sacred groves in the lives of the people reflect their deep sense of reverence for nature. It may be mentioned that the Karbis are hills dwellers and lived in proximity with the forests. They believe that every animate and inanimate object possesses a soul and, therefore, nature must be protected. In fact, the Karbi religious belief system places great emphasis on the concept of soul (*akarjong*), and believe that the soul is immortal and walks alongside humans in the form of shadows. The Karbis believe in several deities, which are both malevolent and benevolent. Collectively they are referred to as *Arnām*. The veneration of ancestors (*Tirim*) is done to appease them and seek their blessings. The ancestors are brought alive through the many community festivals throughout the year, which ensures that kinship ties are strengthened.

The Karbis worship many gods and goddesses, the holy trinity occupying the highest position in the pantheon. *Hemphu*, *Mukrang* and *Rasinja* are the three deities whose names are evoked in all prayers. However, amongst the three deities *Hemphu* is considered the supreme God. Apart from the Trinity, the other gods worshipped by the Karbis include *Peng*, *Arnām*

*Kethe*, *Rek-anglong*, and *Arnam Pharo*. *Peng* protects the household or a family from misfortune through the *peng-ase*, a ritual performed by the people at the individual or household level. *Arnam Kethe* is a house god and worshipped once in three years by sacrificing a pig. *Rek-anglong* is a household deity but the rituals are performed outside in the field, once a year, with only male members being allowed to partake the food items offered to the god. *Arnam Pharo* (Hundred God) is so named as it takes a hundred shares of rice and areca-nut. The Karbis usually decide to perform a ritual when they encounter ill-health or misfortune as they believe that bad omen occurs due to improper and deficient propitiations to Gods, and based on the circumstance, the respective gods are propitiated (Das 2011).

The Karbis practice agriculture-based economy and traditionally the land is owned by the village head known or *Sarthe* (Teron 2008, Pereira et al. 2017). As the forest provides them with food and other produce for their survival, there is a culture-nature co-relation that is reinforced regularly by the community. Rituals and festivals performed at various times of the year bring the society together (Bey 2009). This may also mirror the kinship bonds and implications for community ownership of land (Bhattacharjee 2021). As for the sacred groves, the Karbis ensure that particular geographical areas are demarcated as places of religious significance (Timung 2003). Like most tribal societies, the Karbis believed that the deities owned specific territories which are also their dwelling abodes. Each presiding deity (*Sarpo*) of an area is propitiated in the case of clearing of specific patches of land (Phangcho 2001). The items offered include areca-nut, betel leaves, or/and animals such as hen, goat etc. The sacred groves are a living embodiment of the Karbi culture, and they are a repository of traditional resources for the Karbi religion and culture (Teron 2008). Several such floral resources were inseparable from their animistic rituals and indigenous knowledge of health care practices. The Karbis have been preserving and sustaining the resources through their cultural practices which is handed down from generation to generation.

### **Sacred Groves of the Karbis**

Sacred groves are also sites of ancestor veneration worshipped through a chain of rituals. The traditional priests (*kurusar*) officiate the rituals and carry forward the tradition to ensure the sustenance of the indigenous culture. Sometimes the village headman (*sarthe*) of neighbouring villages situated near the particular sacred grove(s) also perform the prayers and rituals in case a specific village/community has been affected by the wrath

of the deities in the sacred groves. Each deity of the Karbi religious pantheon has particular jurisdiction over certain aspects of the world and life, and they are worshipped through an elaborate system of offerings. The Karbis believe that the creator of the Universe is *Arnām Songsar* or *Songsar Recho* (7). They also believe in the existence of Heaven and *Barithe* is the God of Heaven. There is no system of idol worship, temples, or shrines as in the Hinduism though annual religious events like *Rongker* are held in a fixed location. The beliefs surrounding sacred groves are not openly discussed, but rather kept in secrecy. The *than* is the abode of the deity(s), and they are believed to protect the particular territory where they are venerated. There is much awe and fear of the deities and in case of any untoward behavior towards them, it is believed that severe punishment will be incurred on the person in the form of illness and misfortune.

The most well-known and important sacred grove in Karbi Anglong is *Ronghang Rongbong*, located about 16 kms south of Hamren. The significance attached to the sacred site is that it is also a traditional seat of the erstwhile Karbi king, which also gives a sense of the centrality of the ecosystem in Karbi culture. The Karbi king resides here along with other officials. A large wooden pillar is erected in *Ronghang Rongbong*, which is believed to have been brought from the place of origin of the Karbis before they began their migration journey. There are myths associated with human sacrifice being performed at *Ronghang Rongbong* in early days of their history. It is also believed that in the olden days, in a gap of a year or two years, three men used to come to *Ronghang Rongbong* and self-immolate themselves as a sacrifice to the territorial deity to bring peace and well-being to the neighboring villages. The Teron clan is considered a priestly clan in the Karbi society, and they are said to have performed a ceremony where a man was sacrificed yearly by the Teron priest (*Dengjakethe*). The *Ronghang Rongbong* is a sacred site and generally entry is strictly forbidden, although prayers must be offered if a person has to enter (Bhattacharjee 2010). In contemporary times, the sacred grove of *Ronghang Rongbong* houses a complex instituted by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. The titular Karbi king known as *Recho* or *Lindokpo* is the overarching authority over the political and religious activities of the community. The sacred spatial area of *Ronghang Rongbong* symbolises the legitimate political centre from which is believed to emanate all power.

Another sacred grove is at the *Inglongkiri* hill situated inside the Marat Longri wildlife sanctuary, located 10 kms away from the Diphu subdivision. The local community believes that the abode of the deity should not be disturbed as the deity may unleash wrath on any trespasser. In order to

appease the territorial deity, people offer prayers and sacrifices. *Ritasor* is a sacred grove situated in Baithalango of Hamren district. Considered the deity of hills, the deity who resides here is a popular one and worshipped before the start of annual *jhum* cultivation through rituals of animal sacrifice.

*Bichikri* is considered one of the most critical forests amongst the Karbis. Culturally, it holds an important position as the site is associated with many Karbi traditional beliefs. The grove is protected, and the deity that governs the groves is said to have had an intimate relationship with the Karbis since time immemorial. A community festival is performed by the surrounding villages near the sacred grove known as *Bichikri Rongker*. *Rongker* is an annual religious festival with elaborate rituals performed to appease the territorial deity that governs villages (Bey 2009). Every Karbi village of Karbi Anglong performs *Rongker*. Sacred water bodies are an essential part of sacred groves (Bhattacharjee 2010, 136). There is a belief among the Karbis that *Bichikri* has a sacred connection with a pond which dries up during the monsoon season but swells up during the winter season, in contradistinction to the known seasonal conditions. The pond is also said to be indigenous to certain species of animals and fish that are sacred to the Karbi traditional belief system. As such, fishing in this pond is forbidden and since no fishing activity is performed in this grove, the natural habitat and biodiversity is conserved. It may be noted that this tradition has led to a record-high species-rich flora and fauna amongst all the sacred groves in Assam.

*Arlongpuru* is a sacred grove located about 4 kms away from Umcheret village, near Hamren. This sacred site is covered with trees, huge rocks and boulders and people go there to worship the rocks. No human activity is permitted in the area except the offering of prayers. An annual ritual to appease the deity is performed by a Karbi priest as the malevolent spirit residing here may bring misfortune to the people if proper rituals are not performed.

There is a *Mahamaya* temple grove situated in Samelangso under Dokmoka block. This sacred site and surrounding forests are protected by the Karbis, and plucking of flowers or plants are strictly forbidden. The Karbis consider *Rek anglong* as the protector of the Karbis and occupies the most important position in the Karbi pantheon. It is a territorial deity and this sacred grove is located on top of a hill. It is said that the deity does not tolerate any polluting activity. This deity is also known for his wrath and there are strict guidelines for the rituals. When Karbis go to this sacred grove to offer