



Ethnobotany of Dreams and Dream Interpretations: A study among the Karbis of India

Reena Terangpi, Urmika Phangchopi, and Robindra Teron

Research

Abstract

The Karbi ethnic group of Northeast India associates many meanings between dreams and events in real life. Dream interpretation is an integral part of their traditional religion and healthcare practices. Their traditional concept of dreams and the role of 35 plants in dream interpretation are discussed here. We conducted group discussions in 51 randomly selected villages across the plain and hill areas of Karbi Anglong District, Assam, during January 2010 to October 2012. This was followed by interviews of 175 select elders. Karbis recognize three types of dreams: (1) **mang jangre**, dreams which bear positive correlation with real life; (2) **mang kai**, dream events which are opposite or unrealistic in real life; and (3) **mang phumeng**, dreams which do not carry any significant meaning in real life. Certain plants appearing in dreams carry important messages which have relevance to the individual and his or her family. Karbis also use many plants and their products for preventing nightmares.

Introduction

Dreams are generally described as events that occur involuntarily in the mind during a certain stage of sleep; they include a series of thoughts, images, and sensations occurring in a person which is processed out in the form of a dream. Sigmund Freud (1965) suggested dreams are the manifestations of our deepest desires and entities, often relating to repressed childhood memories or obsessions. Dreams can be extraordinarily vivid or very vague; filled with joyful emotions or frightening imagery; focused and understandable or unclear and confusing (Ossai-Ugbah & Ossai-Ugbah 2011).

Dream interpretation is vibrant among the Karbis, an ethnic tribe of Mongoloid origin in Northeast India. Linguisti-

cally, the Karbis belong to the Tibeto-Burman and more particularly to the Kuki-Chin sub-group of languages (Bhattacharjee 1986, Dutt 1979, Lyall 1908, Phangcho 2001). They practice an animistic traditional religion and believe in immortality of souls and rebirth (Teron 2012). Karbis believe in the existence of two souls: the **pharlo**, which is within the body and represents the life of the individual, and the **karjong**, which is spiritual and remains passive in the individual's body. The **karjong** is immortal and controls and assists the **pharlo** while the latter is considered as the intermediate entity between the body and soul but is mortal, dying with the individual.

Karbis believe that after sleep the **karjong** leaves the body and wanders on earth, journeying to the **chom arong**, the "abode of deceased or spirits" (more precisely the "world of death") and communicating with the spirits of ancestors (**terim**). The experiences of the **karjong** during such journeys are conveyed to the **pharlo** which are reflected as dreams (**mang** in Karbi dialect). They believe **terim** can foretell impending dangers or blessings in the near future;

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such view is also prevalent among the Moa Naga tribe of the region (Loli 2012).

Karbis associate dream events with their social and cultural life. As **karjong** can exist in both the worlds (i.e., earth and **chom arong**), **mang** is considered as a medium through which messages from **arnam** (gods) or **terim** (spirits of ancestors) are conveyed to humans. Further, they believe the appearance of certain plants, animals, and other objects and the action of the individual **pharlo** (soul) carry many valuable meanings for the individual, the family, and for others as well. Karbis therefore associate cultural meanings with dream events for real life (e.g., success, failure, health, fertility). The ability of plants to convey specific information is based on religious beliefs about the plants. Three different views are prevalent among the Karbis about the nature of dreams. First, dreams are always opposite to real life as the events are reflections from the other world (**chom arong**); second, events in dreams reflect the same in real life because dreams are messages from gods and spirits of ancestors; and third, events in dreams hardly matter in real life. The first and second views of dreams are more prevalent. Dream interpretation, the ability of which is confined mainly to elders, has been an integral part of traditional religion and healthcare practices of the Karbis. Diseases (e.g., cough, flu, giddiness, skin irritation), ancestor worship, and propitiation of household deities are believed to be forewarned in dreams through some specific events involving plants, animals, or other objects.

Apart from their meaning in dream interpretations, plants are important sources of food, nutrition, medicines, construction, livelihoods, religion, and culture in the lives of the Karbis. Wild plants are indispensable for sustenance; production from shifting agriculture is limited and people often have to fall back on wild plant resources for food security as well as for other requirements. Ethnobotanical studies among the Karbis were initiated by Jain and Borthakur in the 1970's (Borthakur 1976a, 1976b, Jain & Borthakur 1980). From the early 1980's, there was no active study on Karbi ethnobotany until in 2004, when further ethnobotanical investigations and traditional knowledge was investigated (Gogoi *et al.* 2005, Kar & Borthakur 2007, Terangpi *et al.* 2013, Teron 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, Teron & Borthakur 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, Teron & Gogoi 2004). The above ethnobotanical reports of the Karbis, however, do not include any discussion of dreams and implications of plants in dream interpretations.

Dreams, their interpretation, and their cultural meanings have been the focus of some research (Anthrobus 1993, Garfield 1994, Frazer 1996, Freud 1965, Ossai-Ugbah & Ossai-Ugbah 2011, Tedlock 1987, 1991). From the perspective of tribal traditions, Frazer (1996) argues that "the soul of a sleeper is supposed to wander away from his body and actually visit places, to see persons and to per-

form the acts of which he dreams" (Frazer 1996). Literature and internet searches revealed there is a dearth of information about ethnobotany-based study of dreams from Northeast India. However, one report on anthropological aspects of dreams of the Mao Naga (Loli 2012) has relevance with our present study. The present investigation aims to understand folk concepts of dreams, their cultural meaning, and the role of plants in dream interpretation among the Karbi ethnic group.

Methods

Field studies were undertaken during January 2010 to October 2012 among the Karbis in 51 randomly selected villages spread across the plain and hill regions of Karbi Anglong District (25°30' to 26°36' N and 92°90' to 93°54' E) (Figure 1) in Assam State, Northeast India.

Research methods included participatory approaches of unstructured and semi-structured interviews and group discussions. Data were collected in two phases. At all study sites, group discussions were first organized with folk from all age groups and sexes. We introduced objectives of the research, and verbal consent for participation in the study was obtained. We also selected a subset of informants (35 years and above) from each site as per suggestions of village elders for a second round of field study. Through group discussions, we identified two common views: (i) Karbis believe in dreams, and (ii) the soul (**karjong**) leaves the body during sleep and its action is manifested as dreams.

Based on these views about dreams, we prepared a 4-part questionnaire in the second round, where responses and comments on traditional concepts of dreams, their significance, and the role of plants in dream interpretation were recorded from 175 informants in the age group of about 35 years and above. (People below this age group were found to be far less knowledgeable about dreams in the preliminary participatory study.) We also interviewed specific groups of people such as priests and oracles who are ardent believers in the value of dreams. Plants often encountered in dreams and their related cultural meanings were recorded and tabulated.

Field study necessitated travelling to far flung hill areas of Karbi Anglong district. Such remote villages provided study environments where traditional practices and beliefs are prevalent among the inhabitants with little influence of urban or modern culture. Working among the people with our objectives was not a problem. Since the inhabitants believe in dreams and interpretation of dream events is a vibrant practice, a brief introduction of our research requests was well understood by them.

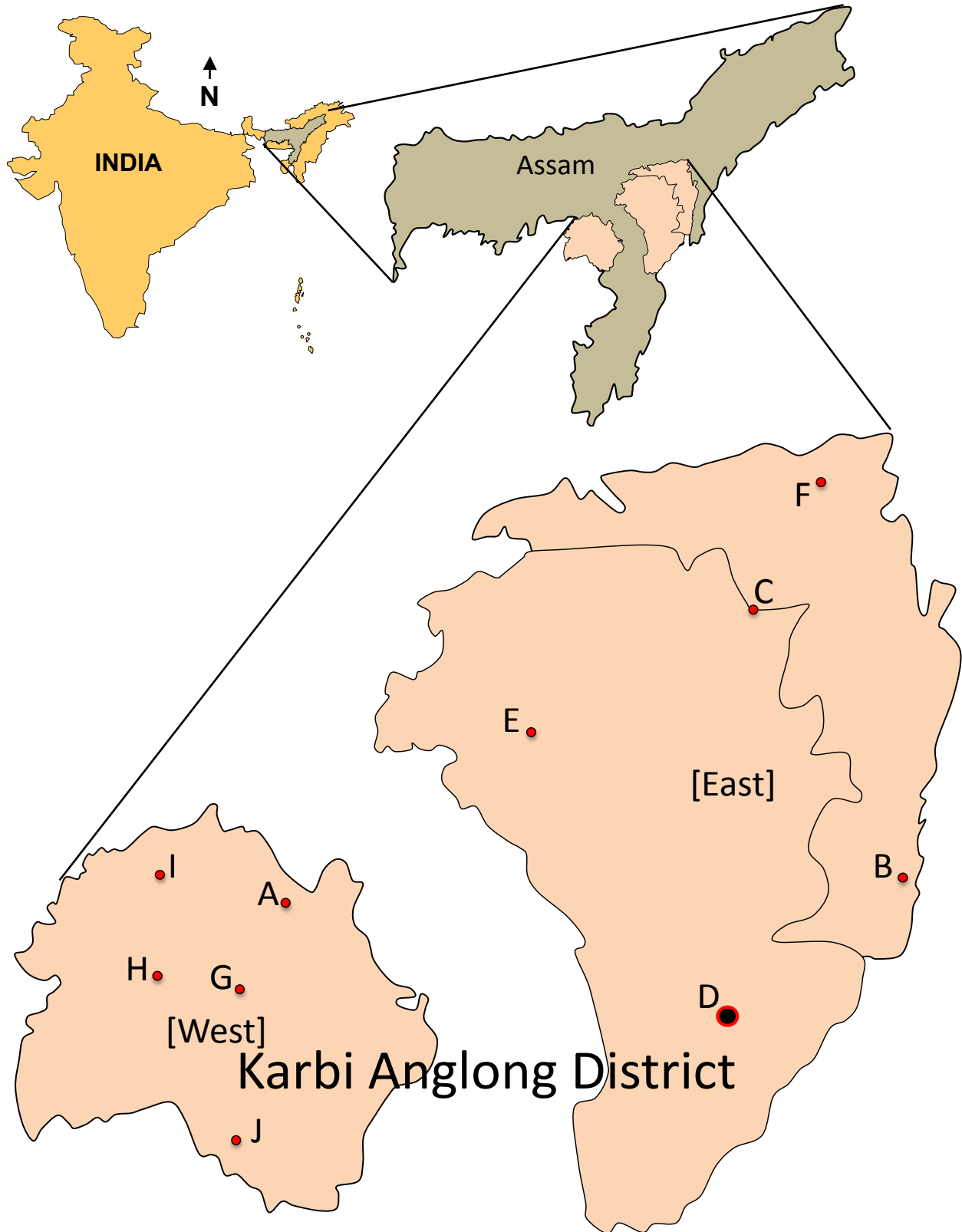


Figure 1. Karbi Anglong District, Assam, northeastern India with field study sites: **A.** Baithalangso, **B.** Bokajan, **C.** Chowkihola, **D.** Diphu, **E.** Dokmaka, **F.** Dolamara, **G.** Hamren, **H.** Manser, **I.** Putsari, **J.** Rongpangbong.

Table 1. Response about concept of dreams and dream interpretation recorded from Karbi persons (n = 175) from in the age group of 35 years and above from Karbi Anglong District, Assam, northeastern India.

Questions	Yes	No
Is the action of soul manifested as dream?	95%	5%
Do events in dreams carry meaning in real life?	86%	14%
Do you take measures based on dream events?	97%	3%
Do certain plants in dreams carry specific meanings?	87%	13%

While people responded positively to discussing the role of plants in dream interpretation, listing and collection of plants was a difficult task. Most informants provided general plant descriptions—sour tasting plants or evil plants—which required elaborate discussions to record local names of those plants and associated meanings. Most of the plants were collected from local environments, but plants such as *Xanthium*, *Mucuna*, and *Laportea* were collected from select habitats. Some ritualistic plants were known to priests only, and this required additional travelling to locate the right persons to collect those plants. At each study site, two to four informants, mostly elders, guided us into the forest for collection of plants associated with dream interpretations. In the field plants were identified by informants based on morphological traits. Diagnostic characters of the plants were recorded and identified with the help of available literature (Balakrishnan 1983, Hooker 1875–1897, Kanjilal & Bor 1934–1940, Prain 1903), processed (Jain & Rao 1977), and preserved in the department of Life Science and Bioinformatics, Assam University-Diphu Campus.

Results

Dreams are influential in the lives of the Karbis. A high response rate to questions on meanings of dreams and roles of plants in dream interpretations showed that out of 175 persons interviewed, the majority of respondents (1) believe actions of the soul are manifested as dreams, (2) agree their dreams make useful meaning, (3) take measures based on dream events, and (4) believe plants that come in dreams carry meaning (Table 1). We also found animals and objects that come in dreams carry important messages which have relevance to individuals and families but discussion in the present paper is limited to plants. Some dreams however, are said to convey opposite meanings in real life while still some dreams do not convey any meaningful message. The Karbis also use plants and plant products for preventing nightmares.

Appearance of certain plants in dreams is said to carry cultural meaning for individuals and families as well as for others. The traditional concept of dreams and cultural importance of 35 plants used in dream interpretation among the Karbis is presented in Table 2. The total number of

Table 2. Inventory of the role of plants in dream interpretations practiced among the Karbis of Assam, northeastern India.

Plants [Family]	Karbi name	Dream events and perceived meaning	Folk beliefs about the plant
<i>Alstonia scholaris</i> (L.) R.Br. [Apocynaceae]	Thengmu	Appearance indicates mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	Used in rituals to nullify influence of evil spirits.
<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam. [Moraceae]	Jangphong	Successful climbing to the tree top indicates impending success; otherwise failure.	Important homestead and food tree.
<i>Basella alba</i> L. [Basellaceae]	Chitu	Consumption is evil.	Consumption is taboo among general Karbi folk.
<i>Bombax ceiba</i> L. [Malvaceae]	Pharkong	Bad omen for mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	Used in rituals to nullify influence of evil spirits.
<i>Byttneria pilosa</i> Roxb. [Malvaceae]	Samphat	Dreaming of the plant is evil in general.	In the past the rough and curved shoots of this plant were said to have slit the throat of an infant.
<i>Calamus erectus</i> Roxb. [Arecaceae]	Pre	The plant is evil in general.	Used in rituals to nullify influence of evil or curse.

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Plants [Family]	Karbi name	Dream events and perceived meaning	Folk beliefs about the plant
<i>Cascabela thevetia</i> (L.) Lippold [Apocynaceae]	Mir ke-et	Bad omen for mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	Fruit is poisonous.
<i>Citrus</i> spp. [Rutaceae]	Hanthor	Eating fruits is considered a message for stomach ache and criticism.	Fruits are eaten with salt and chilli, sometimes causing stomach upset and criticism from elders.
<i>Colocasia</i> spp. [Araceae]	Hen, henru	Consumption indicates impending dermatological problems.	If not properly cooked, it causes irritation in throat.
<i>Cuscuta reflexa</i> Roxb. [Convolvulaceae]	Rikang ke-et	A symbol for ill health.	The plant parasitizes and suppresses growth of other plants, so it's considered evil.
<i>Dendrocnide sinuata</i> (Blume) Chew [Urticaceae]	Bab kangsam	Dreaming and contact with the plant is interpreted for skin itches, flu, and cough.	Leaves and pollen cause severe irritation of skin and sneezing.
<i>Dillenia indica</i> L. [Dilleniaceae]	Plimplum	Indicates impending criticism or likelihood of being scolded by someone.	Excess consumption causes stomach upsets and scolding by elders.
<i>Ficus benghalensis</i> L. [Moraceae]	Chiri jangphong	Bad omen for mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	This tree can devour or suppress other plants so it is equivalent to evil (hi-i).
<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L. [Moraceae]	Cheri	Bad omen for mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	
<i>Ficus hispida</i> L.f. [Moraceae]	Ingthum	Interpreted for ill health.	Latex causes dermatological problem, and leaves are used in ritual for evil spirit, hence, plant is considered evil.
<i>Hibiscus cannabinus</i> L. [Malvaceae]	Hanserong	Consumption of shoots is considered an omen for stomach ache and criticism.	Leaves and tender fruit with dried fish and chilli are a revered item but often cause stomach ache and even fever; overeating often results in criticism.
<i>Hibiscus sabdariffa</i> L. [Malvaceae]	Hanseron ke-er		
<i>Mangifera indica</i> L. [Anacardiaceae]	Tharve	Tree is considered a symbol of fertility for couples; successful climbing is indication of fertility.	Important homestead and fruit tree.
<i>Manihot esculenta</i> Crantz. [Euphorbiaceae]	Ruipharkong	Consuming the tubers is interpreted for headache and giddiness.	Consumption of tubers causes headache and giddiness in some people.
<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lam. [Moringaceae]	Sondon	Consumption of fruit is interpreted for headache and giddiness or dizziness.	Consumption causes headache and giddiness in some persons.
<i>Mucuna pruriens</i> (L.) DC. [Fabaceae]	Phlom-phlom	Contact with fruit is said to forewarn impending dermatological problems.	Hairs of pods are highly irritating.
<i>Olax acuminata</i> Wall. ex Benth. [Olacaceae]	Hanboka	Consuming the leaves is interpreted for headache.	Shoots edible but sometimes cause headache.
<i>Oryza sativa</i> L. [Poaceae]	Sok	Receiving rice is a good omen for wealth while giving rice to others is said to indicate economic loss in real life.	Most important source of food and also has economic value.

Plants [Family]	Karbi name	Dream events and perceived meaning	Folk beliefs about the plant
<i>Polygonum microcephalum</i> D.Don [Polygonaceae]	Delap	Consumption of shoots is considered a bad omen for stomach ache and criticism.	Though an important food, it sometimes causes stomach ache.
<i>Rhus</i> sp. [Anacardiaceae]	Thengso	Contact with the plant indicates impending skin itches.	Latex of the plant cause severe skin itches and rashes.
<i>Rauvolfia serpentina</i> (L.) Benth. ex Kurz [Apocynaceae]	Jok anso	Seeing or contact is interpreted as being safeguarded from many diseases (i.e., good health).	An important medicinal plant that relieves stomach disorder; believed to be an important medicinal plant.
<i>Semecarpus anacardium</i> L.f. [Anacardiaceae]	Barla	Contact with the plant and consuming the fruit indicates impending skin irritation.	Latex of the plant cause severe skin itches and rashes.
<i>Solanum melongena</i> L. [Solanaceae]	Hipi	Consumption of fruit is an indicator for dermatological problems.	Consumption causes irritation of skin in some persons or aggravates an existing skin problem.
<i>Streblus asper</i> Lour. [Moraceae]	Cheri theso	Bad omen for headache.	Ripe fruits edible, but excess eating causes giddiness and vomiting.
<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L. [Fabaceae]	Tantuli	Eating fruits indicates stomach ache and criticism.	Fruit are eaten with salt and chilli but often cause stomach upset which is then criticized by elders.
<i>Tetrameles nudiflora</i> R.Br. [Tetramelaceae]	Pak	Appearance indicates mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	Used in rituals to nullify the influence of an evil spirit.
<i>Thunbergia grandiflora</i> Roxb. [Acanthaceae]	Nong-nong	Bad omen for mental disorder, insanity, or trauma.	Used in rituals to nullify influence of evil or a curse.
<i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe [Zingiberaceae]	Hanso	For boys, it is interpreted as a blessing for divinity; for girls, as a blessing for intelligence.	Considered holy; used in divination for predicting causes of any problem.
<i>Ziziphus mauritiana</i> Lamk. [Rhamnaceae]	Bokori	Eating the fruits in a dream is interpreted for stomach ache and scolding by elders.	Children eat the fruit with salt and chilli which often leads to stomach upset, and elders scold them for this act.
Mushrooms [Agaricaceae]	Kimu	Said to forewarn for giddiness, ill health.	Poisoning affects nervous system.

plants mentioned was greater than 35, but for the purpose of discussions, information on these plants was found to be uniform among the informants.

Discussion

Karbis associate many meanings relating dream events with real life; dream interpretation has been an integral part of their traditional religion and healthcare practices. They believe their ancestors and gods come in dreams and convey valuable messages through the **pharlo** of the individual for themselves as well as for their family. Focus groups, the oracles, and priests unanimously reported gods come in dreams and convey messages to

the individual. Concepts of dreams and dream interpretation by the Karbis are similar to those reported from some Native American tribes. The Zuni and Quiche Maya traditions also believed their ancestors lived in their dreams and take on non-human forms like plants, and they considered dreams as a means of meeting their ancestors (Ossai-Ugbah & Ossai-Ugbah 2011, Tedlock 1987). Karbi folk also share similar beliefs with the Mao Naga on existence of two souls (Loli 2012).

Dream interpretation and nomenclature

Dreams and their interpretation have been in practice among the Karbis for a long time. Messages conveyed by

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gods and ancestor spirits through the **pharlo** are sometimes literal but more often metaphorical through symbolic reference to plants, animals, objects, etc. Cultural meanings of a dream are interpreted based on religious beliefs about the plants, animals, and other objects and also the activity of the individual in the dream. All informants reported that **mang** (dreams) tell about what might happen in the future, such as impending dangers, hardships or blessings, and success or failure in real life; dreams rarely tell about the past. They consider events in **mang** as a source of knowledge of the future. An illustration of dream events and their perceived meanings in real life is presented in Figure 2 (e.g., a flower is a good omen for the arrival of a baby girl). It is a common practice among Karbi for family members to consult their dreams to interpret the possible outcome of planned household events like marriages and rituals. This practice is locally referred as **mang kachehir** (dream narration), and any undesirable dream events are assessed with due priority.

Three main dream types are prevalent among the Karbi folk: **mang jangre**, **mang kai**, and **mang phumeng**.

Dreams which bear positive correlation with real life are referred to as **mang jangre**. For example, dreaming of eating mushrooms leads to ill health or dreaming of flowers by a pregnant woman leads to having a baby girl. **Mang kai** refers to dreams in which the various events are opposite or unrealistic in real life. Events like flying or lifting an elephant, which are unrealistic in true life, fall under this category. There is a popular legend relating to the origin of **mang kai**. The legend describes a tiger who dreamed of eating an elephant and wanted to repeat the same in real life only to be denied by the intelligence of an owl. The legacy of this legend persists among the folk as the proverb "**emang kecholong a-ok, ebang kereng cholongle**" which means "the food a person availed in a dream cannot be enjoyed in real life."

Some dreams do not carry any important meaning and the individual is nowhere associated in real life with the events in these dreams. Such dreams are called **mang phumeng**, and dreams of this type are said to occur randomly. The latter name draws reference from leaf sheaths

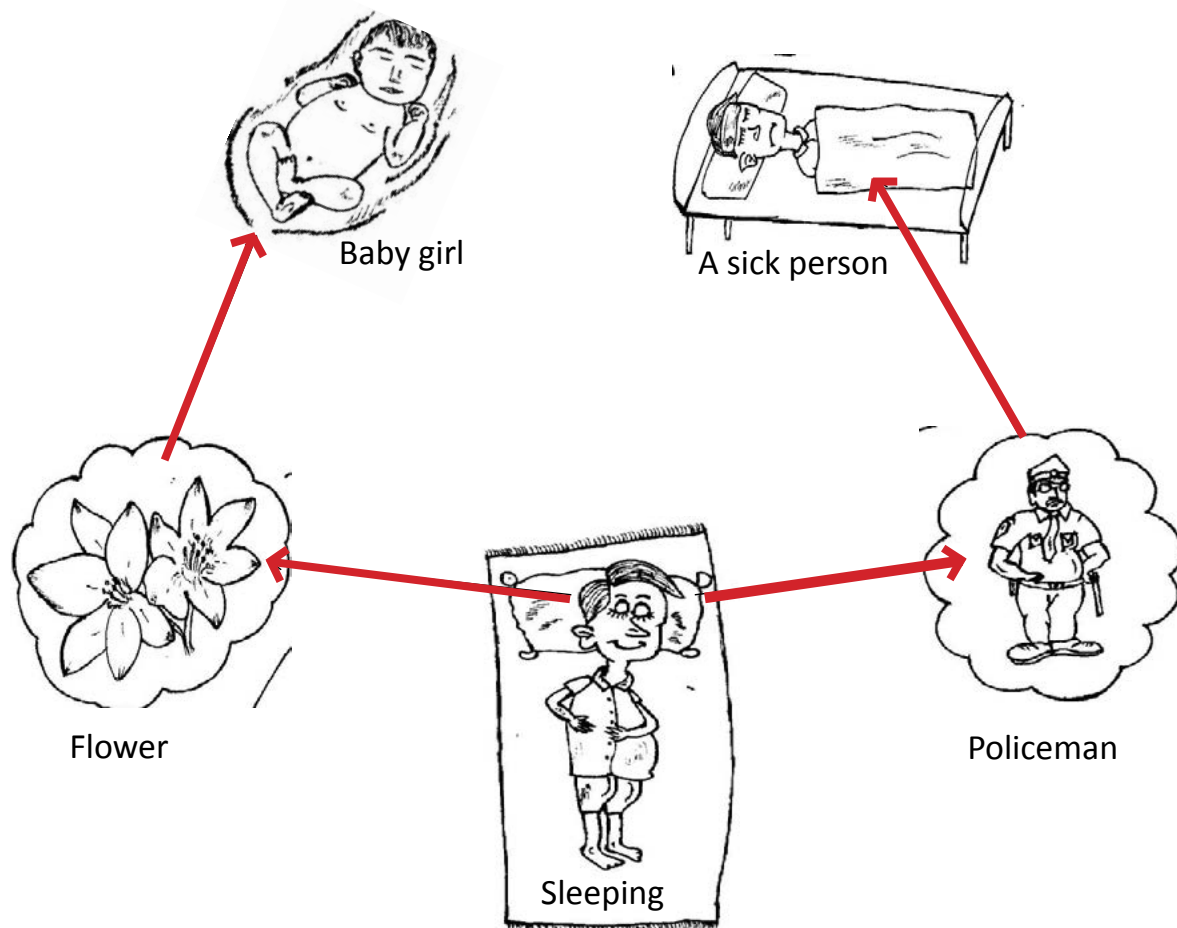


Figure 2. An illustration of dream events and the perceived meaning in real life among the Karbi of Assam, northeastern India.

of bamboo (**phumeng**) which fall randomly throughout the year without fixed periodicity.

Dreaming of plants which convey bad consequences is considered a bad omen; such dreams are taken seriously by elders of the family who sometimes even seek the advice of local wise men to determine the cause of the awful dreams. Folk further believe that innumerable dreams (not necessarily awful) frequently occurring to a person for a few consecutive days are an indication of impending ill health. We heard, on many occasions, elders saying “**ne-mang do pik, ne-ok rengno jibon**” (I had many dreams, I may fall ill).

Cultural value of plants in dream interpretation

The role of plants in dream interpretation has its origin with religious beliefs relating to the origin of earth, cultural uses, and physiological effects of plants on humans. Karbis believe “present day plants are an incarnation of deities and therefore possess some divinity.” Deities, however, have varied characters, and accordingly some plants are considered good while some are evil or bad. Hence, appearance of plants in dreams which are said to be incarnations of evil deities or plants that share characters of evil deities are considered as bad omens. Encounters with *Ficus benghalensis* L. and *Ficus religiosa* L. in dreams are interpreted as indicating headaches and related ailments because these plants can devour or suppress other plants, a character the Karbis compare with evil. *Byttneria pilosa* Roxb. is also considered evil but for a different reason; in the past, the rough, curved shoots of this plant were said to have slit the throat of an infant.

Dreams are also interpreted on the basis of cultural uses of plants. Karbis use certain plants in rituals to nullify the influence of evil spirits on people. *Alstonia scholaris* (L.) R.Br., *Tetrameles nudiflora* R.Br., *Bombax ceiba* L., *F. religiosa*, *Calamus erectus* Roxb., and *Thunbergia grandiflora* Roxb. are used in such rituals to nullify the influence of evil spirits. Appearance of these plants in dreams is thus a taboo.

Dream interpretation from physiological effects of plants on humans is also popular. *Ricinus communis* L., *Streblus asper* Lour., *Cascabela thevetia* (L.) Lippold, *Datura* spp., *Olex acuminata* Wall. ex Benth., *Moringa oleifera* Lam., *Manihot esculenta* Crantz., and bamboo shoots are said to forewarn of giddiness or dizziness as these plants are known to cause the same effect in real life. Edible plants with a sour taste are viewed as indicators of criticism, stomach ailments, and cough. Appearance of *Citrus* spp., *Dillenia indica* L., *Ziziphus mauritiana* Lam., *Tamarindus indica* L., *Polygonum microcephalum* D.Don, *Hibiscus cannabinus* L., and *Hibiscus sabdariffa* L. in dreams indicate ill health. In real life these plants are revered delicacies, but excess consumption results in stomach upset,

encouraging at times criticism and scolding by elders for overeating.

Edible plants with a sugary taste are interpreted as resulting in stomach ache and diarrhea, but interpretation of bitter plants is inconclusive as elders are ignorant on this matter. One woman, however, reported that eating bitter tasting plants in dreams confers protection from stomach ailments as such plants have the same effect in real life.

Mushrooms are interpreted as resulting in severe headache and migraine-like diseases. Plants like *Mucuna pruriens* (L.) DC., *Rhus* sp. (**thengso**), *Dendrocnide sinuata* (Blume) Chew (**bab kangsam**), *Solanum melongena* L., *Semecarpus anacardium* L.f. (**barla**), and aroids cause irritation of the skin, and their appearance in dreams is said to convey a message of impending dermatological problems.

All climbers are considered to represent snakes. Their appearance in dreams is interpreted as an omen of ill health and criticism. Dreaming of cutting any big tree is also considered a bad omen which is interpreted as death of an elder in the family.

Equally, many plants that appear in dreams are interpreted as good omens. When boys dream of ginger (*Zingiber officinale* Roscoe), it is interpreted as being blessed with divinity to become a healer, whereas for girls it is a blessing for intelligence because this plant is considered holy and used in divination. Consumption of chilli is considered a message for intelligence as it stimulates the body by virtue of its hotness. Successful dream-climbing of a mango or jackfruit tree or climbing a hill top is usually considered a message for success in real life. Trees of homestead gardens in general are said to convey messages of peace and harmony. *Rauvolfia serpentina* (L.) Benth. ex Kurz is a particularly important medicinal plant among the Karbis as it relieves fever and many stomach disorders. Appearance of this plant in a dream is therefore considered a good omen for protection from many diseases.

Paddy (*Oryza sativa* L.) is interpreted as both bad and good omens depending on the nature of events in the dream. Receiving rice grains from others is considered a good omen for wealth while giving rice to others is said to indicate economic loss in real life. A good standing crop, however, is interpreted as impending illness. Flowers of any species are considered symbols of femininity and love, and if dreamed by a couple they are interpreted as an arrival of a baby girl.

Though without physical evidence, a few elders whom we interviewed reported specific knowledge of medicinal plants or a treasure trove being conveyed in dreams. In one study site, the village head informed us that knowledge of the medicinal plant *Rauvolfia serpentina* was introduced to the Karbis through a dream. Folklore of the

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plant suggests one Teron Rongsarpo (belonging to Teron subclan), while venturing into the deep forest to collect plants for rituals, suffered from stomach ache. Taking rest under a tree, he fell asleep and encountered a spirit in his dream who advised him to eat three seeds of the plant growing besides his head. When he woke up, true to his dream he found a plant growing beside him. Immediately he ate three seeds of the plant and after some time found relief from the gripping pain. He named the plant **rongman abap**; in the present time the plant is known by the name **jok-an so**.

There is also a popular legend of a dream-inspired discovery of a treasure trove among the Teron subclans. It is said that the eldest of three Teron brothers dreamed of a pot of gold that required human blood for its recovery. He quietly took the son of his youngest brother to the forest, injured his skin with **phelang** (thatch grass), placed a few drops of the blood on a specific site, and recovered the pot of gold. On reaching home the boy suddenly became ill and died but was able to narrate the incident to his parents before his death. The youngest sibling accused his eldest brother of sacrificing his son, and the three Teron brothers vowed not to remain under the same roof. This led to the origin of three Teron subclans, Teron Millik (descendants of the eldest brother), Teron Kongkat (descendants of the second brother), and Teron Langneh (descendants of the youngest brother).

Traditional practices for preventing ke-iso (nightmare)

Karbis believe dreams can be disturbing, often leading to sleeplessness. Awful dreams or nightmares are called **ke-iso** and are said to be attributed to dreadful images, emotional encounters with spirits of ancestors, killing scenes,

accidents, etc., resulting in the body jerking with intense fright. Breathlessness and cold sweat are additional symptoms of **ke-iso**. **Ke-iso** occur in infants, children, and elders. Karbi folk use certain plants or plant products (sometimes minerals and amulets) in order to prevent nightmares, dispel negativity, and strengthen spiritual power. Keeping objects like charcoal and a knife by the bedside reportedly prevents dreadful or psychic dreams and ensures pleasant sleep. It is also a common practice to burn a cocoon of Eri silkworm (*Samia cynthia* Drury, 1773 subspecies *ricini*) or a cotton cloth to dispel a nightmare as it is believed the smoke negates the influence of evil spirits.

Use of plant parts to prevent frightening dreams includes placing leaves of garlic (*Allium sativum* L.), rhizomes of ginger, **jangmu** (seeds of *Brassica rapa* L.), or twigs of **hi-i aripak** (*Schefflera venulosa* (Wight & Arn.) Harms.) under the pillow before sleeping. These practices are still prevalent, particularly for children, irrespective of social and economic status.

Additionally, body movement and position are also given priority for preventing bad dreams. For example, sleeping cross-legged is claimed to restrict free movement in dreams. A related example to the role of smoke in controlling influencing spirits can be observed during death of a person. The family burns clothes in front of the house when a corpse is taken to the cremation grounds (Figure 3). They claim the smoke dispels any negative influence by the spirit of the deceased person on living members of other families.



Figure 3. Dead body being carried for Karbi cremation in Karbi Anglong District, Assam, northeastern India. A burning cloth is placed on the ground by a family member (right); the smoke is believed to dispel negative influence by the spirit of the deceased on other families' members.

Conclusion

Dreams are held in high esteem by the Karbis as being messages from gods or ancestors and are therefore considered important sources of information, knowledge, and inspirations. Traditional beliefs in dreams and their interpretation provide an insight into their worldviews, religious life, and culture. Dreams are considered prophetic or omens of particular importance. Traditional religious beliefs are the main drivers of dream interpretation, but with globalization, modern education, change of religion and acculturation, dream interpretation and cultural value of dreams is gradually declining in Karbi society. Change in landscape is another cause of this decline; some traditional plants (e.g., *Mangifera sylvatica* Roxb., *Spondias pinnata* (L.f.) Kurz, *Xanthium strumarium* L., *Rhus* sp., *Semecarpus anacardium*, and *Mucuna pruriens*) are not found in the vicinity of urban settlements. Today's Karbi youths are ignorant about cultural values, and dream events are hardly discussed with elders. Though dream interpretation for real life may lack physical evidence, its continuation will likely lead to conservation of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. As different cultures around the world ascribe varied meanings to dream events, dream interpretation can be considered an expression of cultural diversity. For the Karbis as of now, dreams are a source of knowledge and their interpretations an integral part of Karbi religious and cultural identity. This is equally true for some dream-based legacies which have shaped the present social structure among the Karbis, particularly the Teron subclans.

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