India is home to hundreds of indigenous people. The Karbi community is one of the significant indigenous populations of Assam, Northeast India. Karbi are culturally and historically distinct from the majority Hindu population of India. The Karbi worldmaking process is ritually mediated through indigenous knowledge conventions. When dealing with storyworlds, I am using the term ‘storyworld’ from a folkloristics approach to understand storytelling as means of sense making and continuously engaging in the creation of a storyworld that a culture per se inhabits. It is problematic to subscribe to a single narrative/myth or history. This can homogenize complex fields. Marginal storyworlds comprise of narratives that are local, vernacular, and non-mainstream that are neglected in the re-imaginings of a one world homogenous storyworld. Some myths from some storyworlds are more powerful than the others, and hierarchies are formed when they collide. The hijacking and appropriation of marginal storyworlds by colonial storyworlds is a present-day reality with different hegemons run by the same agenda.

Myths, storyworlds, and world-building

I will be employing the term ‘mythopolitics’ as a conceptual framework to understand the interactions between different competing storyworlds. I am part of the Mythopol project that seeks to interpret and deconstruct the role of hegemonic Hindu storyworlds in the contemporary politics. I see mythopolitics as an interdisciplinary concept that applies insights from politics, religion, and folklore to acknowledge the multidimensional aspects of competing storyworlds. In reality, neither is free of the other as neither would exist without the other. Mythopolitics is a developing concept that focuses on the present day trends of world-building processes to probe into the possible futures by trying to realize the facets of negotiations, re-imaginings and re-interpretations of the competing hegemonic storyworlds underpinning identity and belonging.

Karbi people speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect and there are numerous expressive verbal repertoires in the Karbi convention. The Karbi way of life stems from the belief in and provisioning of multiple protective spirits. They are animist in the traditional Indigenous Karbi religious sense. Karbi indigenous religion is a cornerstone that shapes the belief system and gives meaning to the world that they inhabit. It entails the co-creation – a collectively held, embodied, and reciprocal knowledge system. As a product of oral tradition, folklites and narratives serve as the only source for Karbi history and understanding one’s own culture. The Karbi are one of the many indigenous populations at the periphery persistently battling for rights and equity over status, identity, and representation. There is an increasing rate of acculturation, assimilation, and asymmetrical power relations aimed at the homogenization of the Karbi culture into the folds of the mainstream Hindu right-wing nationalist agenda. To understand the processes of internal consolidation by majoritarian forces against the Karbi is the focus of this article. I look at it from the perspective of “cultural hijacking.” I use this term to actually look at how majoritarian cultures exert their ideologies by changing the lens of minoritarian through alteration of worldview, knowledge system, and one’s cultural understanding of identity and belonging. Through uniformity and homogenization tactics the cultural blueprints of a community are replaced with new ideas of the Hijackers. The study on the new religious movement Lokhimon will be central in framing my arguments, a group vital for understanding the transformation, conversion, and identity politics. In the discussion that follows, I will attempt to show how Hindu myths created by Hindu nationalists have captured and tailored the imaginations of the Karbi people through media, language, and politics. Myths are hierarchical in nature, and narratives become competitive in situations of asymmetrical power relations. The notion of coexistence is seen from the vantage of the victors, and more than often, the ‘us versus them’ narrative continues to stoke imaginations perpetually fired in a binary opposing system.

In the world-building processes, narratives dictate and shape the world(s). A storyworld is and also the outcome of the world-building which entails a culture’s particular ways of exhibiting itself embedded with notions of identity, language, cultural practices and knowledge systems. Myths are essential, as they legitimize and form the foundations of identities, communities, and even nations. For marginal communities, it is taxing to subscribe to a single narrative/myth, or to a history of uniformity, assimilation, hegemony, othering, and silencing. As some myths are more compelling than others, being carriers of storyworlds, it is consequential when it collides. Throughout history, many worlds have constantly engaged in power struggles and waged war based on differences in thoughts, words, and actions. An alternative to a one-world world-issue could be the acceptance of heterogeneity and multiplicity.

The world we see and experience is an outcome of our perception, but what about the others’ perceptions? The difference is perceived as something of the unknown, and the inability to comprehend the unknown as others do results in a tendency toward rejection and assimilation. Variation and inconsistency – that is, narratives other than what is conformed, uniform, and sanctioned – are disputed in a society that feeds on homogenized ideals. The conception of Karbi identity and history is a classic case of hegemony, domination, marginalization, misappropriation, and misinterpretation. For long, Karbi people have been referred to as “Mikri” (a derogatory misnomer), firstly by the British administration and later by post-colonial India until very recent times. The Karbi history is absent in the discourse of the Indian education system, there’s hardly any acknowledging mentions in the grand narrative.

Cultural hijacking as a phenomenon

The term ‘cultural hijacking’ is an established concept in the study of cultural forms and spatial practices of branding. The nation branding post-independence politics has painted India and its peripheries with ideas of citizenship through religion, media and language. In Karbi Anglong, modes of education are mainly transmitted either through English, Hindu or Assamese. Karbi religious practices and cultural values are either diluted or transformed into becoming a more Hindu based variants in the present situation. I see cultural hijacking as a phenomenon that incapacitates the host (culture bearers) by dissolving the cultural values, displacement of one’s own understanding, and detachments to land, language, and cultural ownership at the behest of the hijackers. It is from this standpoint, I use this concept to analyze and explicate the hegemonic Hindu mythic storyworld and its effects on the marginal storyworlds from the context of Karbi culture. No doubt the eventual outcome of cultural hijacking is a complete assimilation process over time, albeit from the stance of internal colonization. Ashworth and Kavaritz elucidate how the notion of branding and hijacking are related.

The problem stemming from majoritarian versus minoritarian claims in India precludes the British era, but British colonization played an instrumental role in instituting new hierarchical formations within South Asian communities. The ‘Hindu storyworld and Karbi storyworld’ are simultaneously in an arena of contestation and conflict. Culture or cultural traits go on to have a life of their own in everyday repetition and re-enactments through lived performances. Constant interruption in this flow of everyday embodied practices will definitely change the course and may even replace it. There are origin or creation myths behind every Karbi traditional ritual practices that Inform the Karbi people about their world. Orality plays the most vital role in the Karbi world-building process. Repetition and constant engagement with the ritual performances endow possibilities for continuity in shared and lived reality. Point of rupture ensued in the 1900s through the colonial religious classification schemes which enabled the dominant Hindu culture to intervene and impose majoritarian values. Hindu Mahasabha (an organ of Hindu nationalist organization) and associated working as Hindu census supervisors post 1920s rallied in the tribal populated areas of Assam to propagate Hindu beliefs.
This incident harnesses the hijacking of a Karbi storyworld by majoritarian Hindu storyline through power, religion-politics and administrative means. In particular, cultural hijacking is vital in how a text tells us about the story it narrates. For instance, in the case of Hinduisation of Karbi storyworld, it is the colonizer’s duty to shape the different storyworlds on their own. By employing the colonizer’s tools, the Karbi traditional Karbi storyworld and appropriated the legacy of hijacking of other storyworlds. This hijacking is a consequence of the different space-time frames in India.

For marginal communities like the Karbi, the hijacking is therefore a present-day reality in the form of homogenization and majoritarian politics, with different actors’ ties, superstition, and agenda. One of the aftermaths of religious classification schemes gave birth to the Karbi storyworld among the Karbi in the 1950s and since its inception, the group continues to grow in number presenting a challenge to the Karbi in the face of ideological spectacles from the center. It is one of the many cogs in the wheel that are steered by the radical wing nourished out of their vision of India as a homogenized Hindu Rashtra. To explicate this argument, I would like to discuss an encounter I had with an Uber driver during my Fieldwork in Assam, India. While I was traveling, the Uber driver, who was keen on discussing politics remarked, “While I was traveling, the Uber driver, who was keen on discussing politics remarked, “It’s all about the packaging. The labels are different, but the content is still the same.”

I have already written away in the previous section to the ‘Gorai’ community (an Assamese group that converted to Islam during the early 1600s Mughal era) and who himself faced bouts of racism and oppression. His interpretation was very agnostic to the present Lokhimon case indicating the shift in association of identity and belief are proportional to power dynamics and the majoritarian politics.

One of the many consequences of cultural hijacking as a rupture in cultural practices, interpretation and reception of the Karbi storyworld, between the old and new religious movement has its origin, was Lokhimon Sangha, which sought to reform the old Karbi religious belief system, labeling it as an outmoded and outdated, a fashion itself in an organized, uniform, and institutionalized religious system, drawing from the majoritarian Hindu groups. Lokhimon Sangha (VHP) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad involved the creation of a new religious movement in the form of Hindu nationalism in the Northeast India led by Hindu nationalist right-wing politics.

While Hinduism as a religious is viewed as a sect of Vaishnavism in the current iteration, and in its formative days, it included many fascinating yet diverse religious practices. The religious spirit, Lokhimon Inges, is still worshiped as the avatar of Vishnu (as well as the amalgamation of all the incarnations of Karbi heroes, deities, and prominent Hindu gods) in the Karbi folks. The religion was founded on February 5th, 1999, by the spiritual leader alongside his followers. Lokhimon is revered as the creator of the universe/source of all moral authority, a supreme being, with mystical abilities, a creator, and a humanizer. The practices of Lokhimon differ from that of the old Karbi traditional belief system mainly in the celebration of sacrifices of alcohol and rituals, and the consumption of meat. There is a gap widening between the Karbi storyworld and the Lokhimon and the traditional Karbi culture bearers in practices, interpretation and reception of the Karbi storyworld.

Lokhimon is a departure from the old Karbi oral tradition in practice, belief, and fiction. In the narratives, Lokhimon has manufactured new laws and norms to command his followers. New hymns and prayers are crafted in the fashion of saran or Hindu prayer recitation to eulogize his supreme and invincible status. Lokhimon Inges is in the Lokhimon religion is a prominent, central, and god figure. It is noteworthy that Dolomara, where the Lokhimon movement was formed, is a site of resistance to the growing missionary activities. Dolomara and the surrounding areas are known historically for resistance since the late 1800s, and it is evident that the Karbi folks living in those areas chose to resist conversions to Christianity and to adopt Hinduism as an alternative. In 1921, the Assam Census Report posited that the bond between the Karbi and the Hindu storyworld was as vague and operating side by side with Hindu customs making it one and the same. The story of Dolomara is a parallel to this census by launching propaganda campaigns against the Hindu storyworld, deconstruct and persuade all Animists as genuine Hindus.”

The battle of faith ensued for the non-Christian Karbi group as a part of the idea of homogenization and majoritarian politics. The early leaders responsible for the creation of Lokhimon had a deep understanding of the Karbi nationalist organization and were patrons of the Hindu religion. I suspect this case to have elements of both strategic essentialism and complete assimilation. In the case of the former, the Lokhimon leaders sought to transform themselves into something akin to the Karbi storyworlds of Hindu ideals and compete with the missionary adversary of the church. From this perspective, it makes sense that many major religious institutions were at a tug of war. In the current situation, the position of the Karbi in the religious landscape of the majoritarian Hindu-right wing state-run homogenizing policies. Lokhimon in its current movement has its roots in religious methods, and practice, this is more difficult to distinguish. The process of cultural hijacking is apparent in the Karbi storyworld of Hindu ideals. This case begs a question, “How much is enough?”

The Newsletter No. 93 Autumn 2022

Notes


2 https://mythopoletics.info/ (last accessed 28/08/2022)


4 Ernst Bloch (1995) argues “religious stories of emancipation and oppression possess a certain function in that these stories reveal the inherent contradictions of human emancipation, and the door to understanding the need for the transcendence and the requisite of an existent society. In this sense, religion, while often operating as an ideology of emancipation, can be seen as a utopic function in that these stories are dominant within place branding, where agency and representation are at stake. The present study shows a one-way hijacking of cultural hijacking as a rupture in cultural practices, interpretation and reception of the Karbi storyworld.”


7 “The new post-colonial regime is that the differences are not simply matters of belief. They are also a matter of reals. What the world is, is at stake.” See: Law, J (2011) “What’s Wrong With A One-World World?” This paper was presented to the Seminar on “What in the World?: The Mythopolitics project, Oslo, Norway. Email: Thawra.Taron@gmail.com

8 “The name Miclo is still given to the race by the Latin name, Miclo, or Miclos, as they always are called.” See: Elledge, E. (2021) “Governing Sensations and the Politics of Translating: Re unhomogenizing the Charismatic of the Shuar of Ecuador’s Amazon South Eastern—Upstream American Studies. Cambridge University Press. p.7-26.


11 “the Study of Karbi cultural practices are geographical, of Karbi heroes, deities, and prominent Hindu gods/goddesses. The religion of Lokhimon Sangha is the amalgamation of all the incarnations of Karbi heroes, deities, and prominent Hindu gods/goddesses. The religion of Lokhimon Sangha, (VHP), is one of the many examples of the new religious movement in the Northeast India led by Hindu nationalist right-wing politics.


13 “The new post-colonial regime is that the differences are not simply matters of belief. They are also a matter of reals. What the world is, is at stake.” See: Law, J (2011) “What’s Wrong With A One-World World?” This paper was presented to the Seminar on “What in the World?: The Mythopolitics project, Oslo, Norway. Email: Thawra.Taron@gmail.com

14 A post-colonial term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to show how a minority group asserts resistance by clubbing with the majoritarian ideals in reclaiming its identity and political goals.