

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Institute of Cultural Research

Abhirup Sarkar

**Worlds Beyond Maps: Karbi Invisible Landscapes, Indigenous Knowledge, and
the Hidden Ontologies from Northeast India**

Master's Thesis

Supervisor(s): Margaret Lyngdoh, PhD,
Researcher in Indigenous Folklore Studies,
Ülo Valk, Professor,
Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore

Tartu, 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction: The Background of the Study	8
A Brief Socio-Political History	8
A Brief Note on the Karbi Religious Landscape	9
About the Thesis.....	10
Note on AI Usage.....	11
Note on Terminological Decisions and Images	11
1. Methodological Contemplations	13
1.1. The Problem of Working with Secret Indigenous Knowledge	13
1.2. Researching Indigenous Religions.....	14
1.3. Fieldwork Tools and Materials Gathered.....	15
2. Analytical Approaches.....	16
3. Discussion on Existing Literature.....	18
3.1. Overview.....	18
3.2. On Belief.....	19
3.3. On Vernacular Religion	20
3.4. On Narrative Genres	21
3.5. On Telling Legends.....	22
3.6. On the Supernatural.....	22
3.7. On the Ontological Turn and Placelore	23
4. In Search of <i>Rongbin</i>	25
4.1. The <i>Rongbin</i> Review	25
4.2. The First Ethnography: Villages That Were Encountered.....	29
4.2.1. Preface: On the Ethics of Writing What Resists Textualizing	29
4.2.2. Part 1: What I was Searching, and What I Found	29
4.2.3. Part 2: The Village Without Sound.....	30
4.2.4. Part 4: The Ritual Threshold	33
4.2.5. Part 5: The Ritual Performed	34
4.2.6. Part 6: Conversations, Origins, and the <i>Rongbin</i> Cosmology	35
4.2.7. Part 7: On Origins and Possessions	36
4.2.8. Part 8: The Social Ontology of <i>Rongbin</i>	37
4.2.9. Part 9: The Illusive Return	39
4.3. The Year of Synthesis	40
4.3.1. Part 10: Fieldwork Continued.....	40

4.3.2.	Part 11: A New Set of Memorates.....	41
4.3.3.	Part 12: A Revelation	42
4.4.	The Second Ethnography: Villages That We Create.....	42
4.4.1.	Part 13: From <i>Rāmia</i> to <i>Kārjong</i>	42
4.4.2.	Part 14: The <i>Chojun</i>	44
4.4.2.1.	Part 14a: Another Origin Narrative and More Experiences.....	45
4.4.2.2.	Part 14b: Connecting the Dots	47
4.4.3.	Part 15: In Conversation with Dhoniram.....	48
4.4.3.1.	Part 15a: On <i>Rongbin</i>	48
4.4.3.2.	Part 15b: The Possession	49
4.4.3.3.	Part 15c: An Etiological Detour	51
4.4.4.	Part 16: The Tiger Priest	52
4.4.5.	Part 17: The <i>Rongbin Complex</i>	55
4.5.	The Reflection	59
4.5.1.	Overview.....	59
4.5.2.	Post-Synthesis	59
4.6.	The Ritual Implication(s).....	61
	Conclusion(s)	63
5.	Epilogue.....	67
5.1.	Discussing Invisibility in Tibeto-Burmese cultures	67
5.2.	The Social Implications of Invisibility.....	69
5.3.	Next Steps	70
	Eestikeelne kokkuvõte	72
	Bibliography	73
	Appendix	a
	Appendix A. Fieldwork Questionnaire 2026.....	a
	Appendix B. Fieldwork Photographs	b
	Appendix C. Research Protocol Adherence from Centre for Karbi Studies	k
	Non-exclusive Licence to Reproduce the Thesis and Make the Thesis Public.....	m

TABLE OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1:FIRST INTERACTION AND CONVERSATION ON KARBI LEGENDS AND UNCANNY ENCOUNTERS IN DIPHU	B
FIGURE 2:THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN DIPHU; THE CHÉKÉMA CHASED THE TENANT AWAY BECAUSE PÉNG KARKLI WAS NOT PERFORMED FOR A LONG TIME	B
FIGURE 3:AT MBKSS OFFICE IN DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG; FROM LEFT TO RIGHT – SABINA TERONPI, DR KARENG RONGHANGPI, DR MARGARET LYGDOH, BANBAN TALANG, ABHIRUP	C
FIGURE 4:BANBAN TALANG, FIELDWORK ASSISTANT DURING OUR WALK TO RONGBIN IN 2025, DRESSED IN KARBI ATTIRE.....	C
FIGURE 5:SABINA TERONPI, THE ORGANIZER OF THE RONGBIN WALK IN 2025.....	C
FIGURE 6:THE ARTISANS OF MBKSS NGO MAKING HAND-CRAFTED BASKETS WHO WERE VISITED BEFORE THE WALK TO RONGBIN IN 2025	D
FIGURE 7:THE BEGINNING OF THE RONGBIN WALK IN 2025.....	D
FIGURE 8:THE EDGE, BETWEEN THE FARMLAND AND FOREST, RONGBIN WALK 2025.....	E
FIGURE 9:THE BOUNDARY THAT WAS MARKED AS THE ENTRANCE TO RONGBIN, 2025.....	E
FIGURE 10:WAITING FOR THE ALTAR LOCATION TO BE FOUND FOR VENERATION, BEFORE ENTERING THE FOREST, RONGBIN WALK 2025	F
FIGURE 11:THE PACKET OF RICE AND EGG THAT KURUSAR DHONIRAM CARRIED FOR PROTECTION.....	F
FIGURE 12:CLIMBING UP TO THE LOCATION OF THE ALTAR FOR VENERATION DURING THE RONGBIN WALK IN 2025	F
FIGURE 13:THE ALTAR, READY FOR VENERATION TO SEEK PERMISSION TO ENTER RONGBIN FOREST, 2025..	G
FIGURE 14:DR KARENG RONGHANGPI AND DR MARGARET LYGDOH PARTICIPATING IN THE VENERATION RITUAL.....	G
FIGURE 15:THE DISCUSSION WITH INTERLOCUTORS AFTER THE VENERATION RITUAL, RONGBIN WALK 2025	H
FIGURE 16:THE CAVE-LIKE STRUCTURES THAT WERE POINTED OUT TO BE DWELLINGS OF RONGBIN PEOPLEH	
FIGURE 17:WALKING OUT OF THE RONGBIN FOREST, RONGBIN WALK 2025	I
FIGURE 18:DISCUSSION WITH SCHOLARS AND FRIENDS FROM NORTHEAST INDIA. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ABHIRUP. DR MARGARET LYGDOH, DR TALILULA, DR DHARAMSING TERON, ELWIN TERON, BANBAN TALANG AFTER THE RONGBIN WALK IN 2025	I
FIGURE 19:AI-TEXT CHECK RESULTS PART 1	J
FIGURE 20:AI-TEXT CHECK RESULTS PART 2	J

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have materialized if not for the generosity of the people who gave me much beyond just their time.

Dr Margaret Lyngdoh is the reason everything began in the first place. She was not only the hand that helped me take first steps, but also took me on, as her research assistant, shared with me her resources, connections, questions, and responsibilities that has structured this whole research. Her guidance, patience, and kindnesses have shaped this thesis. I am grateful to her for helping me reach where I stand today as a student of folkloristics.

Professor Ülo Valk had asked me to come to Tartu if I wanted to continue my dream of becoming a folklorist back in 2024 in Guwahati, Assam; connected me to Dr Lyngdoh, and then at the Young Folklorists Conference in Vilnius said, “Why don’t you write about *Rongbin*? No one has ever worked on something like this before.” He has not only supported every path this work has taken, but also my entire journey so far, as a scholar in the making. With patience and genuine curiosity.

Dr Kareng Ronghangpi has been, almost at every step of my research, the most steadfast support I could have sought in Karbi Anglong. She has been my friend, interlocutor, reporter, and translator, all at once. Her friendship, knowledge, and trust in this work have helped deepen my understanding of the Karbi world. Serlibon Derapi, Jirmi Tisso, and Mahesh Rongphar, offered not only their translation skills, but engaged in long conversations and silences, offering their worldviews with a kindness I would not have found in years. To Sabina Teronpi, who introduced the word *Rongbin* to me, Dhoniram Ronghang, Sarkimi, Sika Engtipi, and to every Karbi friend and interlocutor who shared with me their stories, names, directions, spaces, and meals – all that I have written here belongs to all of you. I am, but a mere conduit. To Dharmsing Teron and Dhonison Lekthe, who are tradition bearers and possess knowledge that become the backbone of such research works. Thank you for trusting me with it. I am fully cognizant of the weight that the trust carries and I hope I continue to live up to it.

My brother, Bishwarup, made this possible. He was the pillar that sustained me across years of studies, fieldwork, and writing, and asked for nothing in return except for *Biryani* once I get a PhD. I wait to fulfill his wish. My parents, whose faith, amid turmoil, never deters in my dedication to be an academic.

To all the Indigenous scholars and friends who engaged with me with incredible enthusiasm and intellectual seriousness. Dr Reep Pandi Lepcha, Dr Talilula, Dr Claire

Scheid, who despite being established scholars have made me feel more like a friend. And to my colleagues who kept asking me questions at every presentation I made. Elsa Hillis, for introducing me to Sensorial ethnography, Lachlan Bell, for always asking me to clarify my theoretical pivots. Gilbert Sangriang, F. Lalrinpuia for persistently helping me learn Indigenous knowledge that I would have never found in formal fieldworks. And to the most unprecedented connections that helped in intellectual and theoretical brainstorming, Dr Indrek Peedu and Dr Roomet Jakapi. All of you helped me make this so much better than I anticipated.

To the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu for the space, time, and freedom to think, ask, read, test, fail, get back up, write and to keep moving forward. Most importantly, to allow me to follow my curiosities wherever they led. This is what such wonderful support resulted into. Also, to every single person who contributed to the success of the fieldworks including but not limited to Gabriel Lyngdoh, Sadik Lyngdoh, Justin Kharkongor, Banban Talang, Meban Talang, Jirsong Asong, members of Rongphar family, and all those who I could not name here for the lack of space.

Finally, and most importantly, to all the other-than-human agents who do not appear on any census data. And to *Rongbin*; I sought to write about what has resisted textualizing for long. And I acknowledge the role that other-than-humans have played in my endeavor, inclusive of the epistemic boundaries that were set. I have tried my best to honor that boundary. What this thesis includes, will always stay a reminder that, all of this knowledge belongs to the place itself, and to the people who tend to it. *Rongbin* did not need my intervention. Thus, I am grateful to have been allowed to be close enough to write about it, nonetheless.

Disclaimer: I do not claim any right on the stories. There have been no confluations. The comparisons are only thematic and for conceptual and analytical purposes.

Abhirup,
University of Tartu,
Tartu, Estonia

Abstract

In the Karbi community from Karbi Anglong, India, special settlements exist that are named and are ontologically consequent for the community, but cannot be seen. They are called *Rongbin*, invisible villages whose invisibility is not a deficiency of perception or just spatial concealment. It is a condition for their existence. *Rongbin* hides, and will not show up in the visible registers of the world, unless, it chooses to. Karbis do not treat *Rongbin* as lost or latent. They are present and relationally maintained. Their authority over the land, the ancestry, and the sacred is independent of the visibility.

This ethnography is grounded in fieldwork, spanning over two years. This work considers *Rongbin* as an opportunity towards developing a sustained inquiry into how indigenous landscape knowledge manifests ontological categories that refuses incorporation into institutional and cartographic accounts of spaces. The argument is not that Karbis “believe” in *Rongbin*. But that the analytic vocabulary persistently employed in studying such phenomena, involving categories like hiddenness, absences, or the obfuscated sanctity, already forecloses that, what it claims to address. Invisibility thus, is not a puzzle with a solution but a structural property of an exclusive category of place that is maintained in practice, narrative, and a particular orientation towards the landscape.

The text proceeds through oral narratives, etiologies of *Rongbin* sites, and close attention to the ways in which the community engages and organizes the invisible landscape. The scholarly lenses of analyses involve the ontological turn, vernacular theory of religion, belief narratives, supernatural legend, and placelore. The contribution is intended to further the scholarship on magic, religion, rituals, and invisibility. While religious studies and folkloristics have developed tools that can analyze what communities believe in, this text looks into conditions that render certain categories of knowledge structurally resistant to such analysis, and what does such phenomena that refuses resolution asks of the ethnographer.

Keywords:

Indigenous Religions, Invisibility, Invisible Village, Northeast India, Karbi

Introduction: The Background of the Study

*In the beginning, before the invisible village existed, we were all the same. But then, this group of Karbis gained high knowledge in the art of magic and could make themselves disappear.*¹

The Karbis² are one of the Tibeto-Burman Indigenous³ populations from Northeast India, distributed across the hills of Karbi Anglong district in Assam and Meghalaya, and the plains of Golaghat, Nagaon, Morigaon, and Kamrup districts. (Ramirez 2014, 21) They are historically categorized in the *Ahom Buranji* chronicles and the colonial records under the exonym *Mikir*, considered a misnomer now. Karbi scholar Dharamsing Teron is unequivocal, “In everyday Karbi vocabulary inherited from the ancestors, the term ‘Mikir’ does not find any mention anywhere in the surviving legends, myths or stories, let alone making any sense to them.” (Teron n.d., 1) The formal transition to “Karbi” was institutionalized in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment Act of 2002. (Ramirez 2014, 40) Colonial ethnography had erstwhile also characterized the community to be ‘homogenous,’ ‘largely sedentary,’ and ‘unwarlike.’⁴

However, scholars like Philippe Ramirez, Dharamsing Teron, Maragaret Lyngdoh, Vulli Dhanaraju, etc. reveal a society that is marked by sophisticated interplay of several phenomena including strict internal clan structures and adaptive socio-cultural fluidity that mediates the ethnic boundaries through cross-ethnic processes. One of Teron’s preferred etymology exemplifies the point, “Karbīs, for generations, have had the practice of performing purification acts after every ritual, known as ‘*thekar kibi*’ from which the people got their name... Karbi is a fusion of ‘*a-kar kibi aso*’ or ‘keeper of the purity’ from which the name of the people evolved.” (Teron n.d., 4)

A Brief Socio-Political History

Karbi territorial history is mapped by regular mobility. Traditional *Ahom* records suggest that Karbis might have originally inhabited the riverine parts of the Kalang and Kopili

¹ Dhoniram Ronghang (Ritual Priest), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karbi_people [for introductory reference only]

³ The Karbi indigeneity here is understood through the Karbi class of religious practices, as an ethno-political concept, as a geographically and historically contingent relational concept, and through the discourse of *invisibility*, through the material entities and the Karbi lived religion that encompasses the content of the current thesis. In addition, this text offers the ninth way of using ‘indigeneity,’ as an outcome of social, political, geographical, cultural, and religious invisibility that is imposed on the communities. (Tafjord 2017, 36)

⁴ “The peaceful disposition of the Karbis and their abhorrence for confrontation fitted the colonial category of ‘non-warlike’ and hence ‘timid’ race.” Teron, n.d. Privately Circulated Manuscript

rivers, as well as the Kaziranga region before the Burmese incursions in the early 19th century that forced them to retreat towards the central massif. (Stack & Lyall 1908, 15-17; Dowdy 2022, 294) This transition also introduced Assamese refugees into the Karbi society through ritualized adoption. The fundamental unit of a Karbi social organization is the *Kur*, the exogamous, patrilineal clan system. (Engti 2024, n.d.) The five primary clans are, Teron, Terang, Ingti, Ejang, and Timung. They are further segmented into numerous sub-clans and distributed across the Karbi plains and the hills. (Teron 2020, 4) Marriage within the same clan, *Kursenem*⁵, is an irrevocable transgression. *Kurkepon*⁶, is the ritual mechanism that integrates non-Karbhis or children of unknown paternity into the Karbi community. This permeability that is characteristic of the Karbi social ontology will prove critical to the analysis of *Rongbin* in the subsequent chapters. Working among the Karbis from Khasi hills, the traditional political system was identified by Ramirez to be organized through ritualized territorial units called *Longri*, with the *Lindok* or king residing at *Ronghang Rongbong* and assisted by a cabinet of dignitaries – this aspect is same for the hill Karbis that this work engages with. (Ramirez 2014, 108)

A Brief Note on the Karbi Religious Landscape

“The Karbis have no institutionalized religion. They believe in *Tirim* (ancestors) and an innumerable number of supernatural spirits/entities – both malevolent and benevolent as protective and territorial spirits called *Longri Arnàm* and spirit deities such as *Hémphū*, *Rasinja*, and *Mukrāng*.” (Ronghangpi 2025, 17) However, the term religion is used in this thesis to denote the complex of practices that are part of Karbi interactions with nature and other-than-humans, and more, in routine or ritual contexts. Karbi deities are not generally idolized or enshrined. The post-mortuary ritual *Chomàngkàn* is one of the most elaborate gatherings that can last up to five days, and is conducted to escort the souls of deceased family members to *Chomārong*, the ancestral realm. (Teron 2020, 32) This study establishes strong empirical grounds to further the understanding of one of the many territorial deities that Karbis venerate – *Longsāng Mukrāng*⁷. Influencing the religious landscape and of particular ethnographic importance is Ramirez’s identification of the

⁵ “‘*Kursenem*’ the marriage between a boy and a girl of the same clan is a punishable crime.” In Social Custom of the Karbis: A Study within Folkloristic Perspective

⁶ “‘*Kurkepon*’ is another important feature and ritual associated with through which a child without a father or a non-Karbi person is converted to the Karbis and given a clan of the community.” In Social Custom of the Karbis: A Study within Folkloristic Perspective

⁷ Dhoniram Ronghang (Ritual Priest), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

multi-ethnicity ‘triangle’ at the Assam-Meghalaya border. The region where the Karbis, Khasis, and the Tiwas interact, not only through systems of surname equivalences but narrative parallels as well. (See Chapter: *In Search of Rongbin*) In summary, while the clan system among the Karbis ensures internal cohesion, mechanisms such as *Kurkepon* and others that establish cultural fluidity, position the Karbis at a critical cultural nexus in Northeast India, despite the continuous emergence of new religious (especially Hindu and Christian) and political appendages. The emic scholarly perspective quite strongly expressed by Teron deliberates the Karbi positionality, “The Karbis, too have legitimate claim to their own philosophy and present themselves to the world as they are and not as mere objects of study or research. The Karbi ancestors had conceived, defined and evaluated the world as reflected in their belief and value system.”⁸

About the Thesis

This thesis looks into *Rongbin*, the Karbi invisible landscape and hidden village. The existing scholarship on *Rongbin* is scarce. The only substantive texts are by Ronghangpi, Teron, and Dhanaraju. Teron characterizes *Rongbin* as a “mysterious and surreal world,” “a hidden village,” “a mythical narrative,” “a reflection of the Karbi ancestors,” and “a part of popular Karbi folklore.”⁹ However, Ronghangpi adopts a rigorously ethnographic approach, reporting from her interlocutors of an “invisible village located in the dense forest of *Inglongkiri* mountain” guarded by the territorial deity. (Ronghangpi 2025, 300-301) Her interlocutors recount several encounters with *Rongbin* and its populace, “there have been several times even other rangers have seen women or clothes hung for drying in the forest, but then it would disappear.” (Ronghangpi 2025, 300) She also discusses ritual text and chants that can create *Rongbin*. Both scholars have underlined the inter-community discord as a founding condition for *Rongbin*, but the analytical premise has not been developed. This thesis thus makes a comprehensive ethnographic account and analysis of *Rongbin* and tries to engage with *Rongbin* simultaneously as a phenomenon, a discourse, an experience, a legend, a myth, and a ritual practice, finally extending it to the possible connections with the larger Tibeto-Burmese hidden landscapes’ belief complex¹⁰.

⁸ See: Teron, n.d., “Understanding Karbi Philosophy of Life”

⁹ See: Teron, n.d., “Understanding Karbi Philosophy of Life”, 14

¹⁰ See Chapter: *Discussing Invisibility in Tibeto-Burmese Cultures*

The first two chapters introduce the Karbi demography, socio-political setup, and religious landscapes alongside the methodological and analytical frameworks with the primary research objectives and questions. The third chapter examines existing theoretical tools employed to hidden landscapes through *Rongbin*. The fourth and central chapter comprises the ethnographic account with embedded analysis and reflections followed by the conclusions. An epilogue, considering this thesis's status as a first comprehensive text on the phenomenon was necessary. This additional chapter addresses the concept of invisibility, its ritual and social implications, and future research trajectories. The current fieldwork, despite its depth, remains a thin corpus for a substantial conclusion. Therefore, in light of this, the thesis foregrounds the ethnographic process, descriptive depth, and conditional analysis following a narrator-centered approach, over premature analytical closure. Appendices in this work include the fieldwork questionnaire, photographs, and a certificate of research ethics from the Center for Karbi Studies.

Note on AI Usage

This work contains no generative AI text. Combination of ChatGPT and Zotero were used to format the **Bibliography**, and **Estonian Summary**. **Grammarly (Education)**, licensed through the University of Tartu, was used for grammatical corrections and sentence rephrasing. Every draft preparation was followed by editing using Grammarly and AI-text check. The additional AI-text is attributed primarily to multiple quotations in the thesis chapters, where the secondary texts were AI-cleaned. A screenshot of the AI-text checker is attached for reference. (See: *Appendix B*)

- **Strike-Plagiarism score is Similarity Coefficient (0.93%).**
- **Strike-Plagiarism score is Quotation Coefficient (9.51%).**
- **Total Generative AI text (~ 1-2%).**

All usages of AI applications in this thesis strictly follow the guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence in thesis writing provided by University of Tartu at <https://ut.ee/en/content/guidelines-using-ai-applications-teaching-and-studies>.

Note on Terminological Decisions and Images

Karbi terms in this text, including but not limited to proper nouns such as *Rongbin* (Invisible Village), *Kurusār* (Ritual Priest), *Longsāng Mukrāng* (A territorial deity), etc.

are used as such with accompanying English translations based on what was discussed and offered during fieldworks as well as with cross-reference to the *Karbi Lamtasam (Karbi-Assamese-English Dictionary)* (ed. Hanse 2020) and *Karbi-English Dictionary* (ed. Taro 2019). If an appropriate English translation is not possible, the text resorts to a longer interpretive approach to avoid decontextualization in search of an English counterpart. All images in this thesis are clicked by the author.

1. Methodological Contemplations

Karbi scholar The'ang Teron, writing about the Karbi epic *Mosera*, frames a foundational challenge, “to appropriate the best way to understand *Mosera* is from the Karbi context keeping it relevant to the community while making sense to the outside world.” (Teron 2020, 14) His dilemma was textualizing performance outside the ritual context. But the present study encounters a structurally denser set of obstacles. That is, the ethnographic study of a sacred and secret phenomenological complex whose protected nature restricts extensive prior study.

1.1. The Problem of Working with Secret Indigenous Knowledge

The consequential damage by extractive research paradigms on Indigenous communities, from evolutionary perspectives (Tylor 1871) to Orientalist frameworks (Said 1978), continue in scholarship to date, that treats communities as sites of extraction instead of co-production. Any sustained engagement with epistemologies organized around selective transmission will eventually come across methodological challenges that standard ethnographic practices do not adequately address. *Rongbin* presents such a case.

The first problem in analyzing *Rongbin* is epistemic. Knowledge about *Rongbin* is neither available in a systematic manner nor distributed evenly. It is only accessed via different registers of telling, restrictions, and deliberate trust building. These do not hinder the work but are core features of the knowledge complex itself. Through this, *Rongbin* is molded, sustained, and transmitted. The standard ethnographic aspiration toward a “thick corpus”¹¹ is, in the current stage of this work, not merely impractical but also a conceptual and epistemic fallacy. It would render selective transmission as accidental rather than structural. Goldstein’s analysis of how institutions actively objectify the narrator in order to “co-opt” their story is exactly the dynamic that this research attempts to avoid. (Goldstein 2015, 137) The methodological response is an account that is explicit about its own incompleteness and treats that, as analytically significant rather than a deficiency.

The second major challenge is translation at two levels, first the linguistic transliteration from Karbi to English, second the epistemological shift between the ontological frameworks. *Rongbin* itself exemplifies the depth of the issue. The literal, “hidden (*Bin*) village (*Rong*)” communicates the referent at a basic level but is an import

¹¹ “The distribution of tradition in a cohesive community, individual repertoires and collectively shared knowledge, variation of folklore according to social role, performance context, audience and the socio-psychological ambience.” (Honko 1998, 12)

from foreign spatial and ontological assumptions. *Rongbin* is not hidden in the same way as Narnia.¹² (Lewis 1950-56) *Rongbin*'s invisibility is procedural, relational, emergent, and decisive. A complex that can only be approximated in English. What gets lost in this translation otherwise, is the exact ontological specificity that establishes *Rongbin* as analytically significant.

The response has been to establish a balance between Karbi terminologies and English translations as approximations rather than equivalences. This ensures that the translational gap is itself treated as a subject of analysis, deriving the study's larger implications regarding invisibility. This follows the ontological turn's insistence that the task is to allow the material to generate newer analytical possibilities "instead of being reduced to targets of ridicule and scorn." (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 285) Linguistic translation has also been addressed through a multilingual iterative triangulation by comparing the accounts from multiple interlocutors, cross-referencing vocabulary, and attending to established contexts, along with the researcher's active learning of the language.

1.2. Researching Indigenous Religions

The methodological framework employed here is inspired by the works of folklore, indigenous scholarship, and the researcher's supervisor. (Lyngdoh 2023) It takes a four-stage recursive form for this study where each stage informs and revises the other iteratively.

First stage is exhaustive fieldwork that is sustained, embodied, and contingent on the persistent relational engagement with the community. Two formal fieldwork periods of total four months were conducted between 2025 and 2026. These field visits were inclusive of a year of analysis and theoretical developments through conference discussions and personal interactions in 2025. Dr Lyngdoh's existing interlocutor network established a foundational relational trust without which the fieldwork would not have been as fruitful as it was. Fieldwork included participant-observation, extended semi-structured conversations across interconnected domains of knowledge, and a compound of direct phenomenological engagements with the tradition.

¹² The *Chronicles of Narnia* was a novel series by C.S. Lewis that involved a parallel hidden reality that could only be accessed by walking inside a wardrobe.

Second stage was analysis that was sustained, multi-layered, and critically engaged with the fieldwork material across emic and etic theoretical frameworks simultaneously. Following Dundes' argument, (1965, 1980, 1989) that a folkloric account without analysis remains an incomplete folkloristic record combined with the concern not to render *Rongbin* to the realm of anticipatory salvage ethnography (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2024, 86-87), makes this work both ethically and epistemologically necessary. Therefore, analysis here is not a subsequent phase but an integral second stage, in persistent dialogue with the fieldwork wherein even the return to the field was inspired by the analytical questions that arose from the first one.

The third stage is sustained communication with the community throughout the whole writing process, a methodologically unconventional feature of the framework. However, this stage responds directly to the ethics of researching sacred and protected Indigenous knowledge. This is not a process to fact-check against an authoritative source that does not usually exist in oral traditions but an open-ended collaborative engagement to develop interpretations via discussions of analytical frameworks with interlocutors who themselves are sophisticated thinkers of the phenomena being studied, incorporating their contributions into the scholarship as well. This is in line with Goldstein's argument that those who "profess to have their ear to the ground do justice to that honor," (Goldstein 2015, 138) treating the emic interpretations not as data for analyzing, but analysis themselves, establishing a bidirectional non-impositional epistemic commitment.

Stage four is revisiting the field. This completes the claim of a recursive approach as a part of this study. *Rongbin* knowledge cannot be stabilized in a fixed narrative. It is dynamic, relational, and culturally contextual. A continued fieldwork to generate the "thick corpus" was an epistemic precondition for this study. An ongoing commitment that was both, an ethical obligation and a structural imperative.

1.3. Fieldwork Tools and Materials Gathered

Semi-structured interviews, conversation-based ethnography, participant-observation, storytelling, direct sensorial engagement with the landscape, self-documentation, and a triangulated translation were the methodological tools employed. Materials gathered include approximately twenty plus hours of audio conversations that include several origin narratives, experience stories, and more that are accompanied by field notes, unrecorded conversations, personal correspondences, audio/video, and photographic documentation. The corpus carries structural incompleteness, a supportive and growing

interlocutor base, and partial inaccessibility that forms the part of the methodological record and analysis, rather than a lack for this work.

2. Analytical Approaches

Writing about *Rongbin* posed a unique analytical challenge. A single external framework employed at this early stage of delineating *Rongbin* might result into an epistemic reduction rather than expand the frameworks to accommodate *Rongbin*. It is not merely a cautionary rhetoric. *Rongbin* is organized in overlapping and unfinalized genres that structurally resist a completionist account. It is preserved through complexities that transgress the tidiness usually imposed by scholarly frameworks. The analytical architecture for this work has been developed with this fallacy in mind.

The alternative is not an abandonment of scholarly analysis but a reconfiguration of the available frameworks in a layered, iterative, recursive, and open-ended manner. Belief, vernacular religion, expressive genres, and legend narratives are the four analytical lenses employed here, enveloped within the ontological turn and placelore. No framework functions as a disjoint sequential filter but as embedded and complementary analytical combinations that produce a multi-dimensional account a singular framework could not have generated.

Belief becomes a structuring principle. Belief in *Rongbin* is organized around behavior, emergent narratives, and established ritual practices, that determines how the landscape must be negotiated with. The generic distribution across, etiological narratives, ritual chants, experience tales, and cautionary rumor-legend stories make *Rongbin* analytically productive. Vernacular religion, as Bowman and Valk posit in the introduction of their edited volume, “shifts the focus from ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ as abstractions to the power of individual creativity to shape religious lives.” (Bowman & Valk 2012, 15) This has enabled *Rongbin* to be analytically placed in the complex religious landscape of Karbi Anglong (See Chapter: *The Tiger Priest*). The expressive genres layer, embedded in the ethnography addressed the legendry and transmission modalities through which *Rongbin* is sustained through memorates, legends, etiologies, and the inherent generic fluidity that exemplify Oring’s “rhetoric of truth.” (Oring 2008)

The most potent risk in researching secret and protected knowledge is relational rather than conceptual. The analysis might displace the community’s active relationship with the landscape that this work studies. As Goldstein warns, “by not intervening in the sometimes wrong-minded public treatment of vernacular culture, we become complicit

in that treatment.” (Goldstein 2015, 138) The ethnography writing style and the analytical matrix developed is exactly the intervention mentioned. The ethnography keeps the analysis only partially embedded, allowing most of the meaning to emerge from the fieldwork itself. The analytical architecture disallows simplification of a complex phenomenon by resisting an enforced completion. The following research objectives and questions are a consequence of the above methodological and analytical contemplations.

The first research objective is to document and analyze the *Rongbin* complex as a variegated, relational, and an ontologically consequential form of Indigenous landscape knowledge. The second objective is to examine and theorize the relationship between agency of the space, ontological multiplicity, and vernacular religious practices in a culturally-contextual, embedded knowledge tradition. The final objective is to demonstrate and develop a methodological-analytical architecture for ethically engaged research with protected Indigenous knowledge, that highlights the analytical productivity of epistemic incompleteness rather than look at it as a research limitation.

Following are the primary research questions that have been formulated to achieve the research objectives:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How does the *Rongbin* complex contribute in understanding the relational ontology of a place and to understand the landscape as organized through different registers of existence?

RQ2: What are the theoretical and analytical implications of examining this ontology as an epistemological claim rather than a representative of an underlying rational reality?

RQ3: How does the *Rongbin* complex enact a distributed epistemic authority across a knowledge hierarchy organized by community-specific relationalities revealing social organization of Indigenous people that have been persistently subjected to external religious and political pressure?

RQ4: Through what specific genres, rhetorical strategies, and intertextual relationships is the *Rongbin* knowledge transmitted and validated?

RQ5: What constitutes the *Rongbin* complex? How does the etiological, experiential, and emergent narrative complex of *Rongbin* contribute to the community’s understanding of their own landscape?

RQ6: How does the *Rongbin* emerge as placelore that is inherently experiential, accommodating to analysis of landscape practices and vernacular knowledge within the community, and is enacted in the Karbi ontology?

These questions, mark the foundation to not only the ethnography conducted for this study but also the study itself, inclusive of the analytical, reflections, and subsequent sections.

3. Discussion on Existing Literature

3.1. Overview

Rongbin does not emerge from a socio-political vacuum. Fryberg and Townsend, writing from a disparate context note that, institutional discrimination exists much beyond mere legislative remedy. (Fryberg & Townsend 2008, 1) The condition is analytically extensible to Indigenous communities in Northeast India. Despite the active status of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and the establishment of the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs)¹³ to protect Indigenous rights, culture, and resources, Northeast India continues to be subjected to a predominantly extractivist gaze by the state. This results into flattening of Indigeneity, while accelerating acculturation. The Karbis face this precarity on multiple fronts. Their lifeways, worldviews, and religiosities, continuously engulfed by majoritarian exogenous religious and political bodies, rendering Karbi indigeneity invisible. This is not a mere sociological interpretation of invisibility but a manifest condition of epistemic whitewash.

This segment of the thesis, provides a brief, directed, and focused review of the frameworks for analyzing *Rongbin* as a culturally contextualized, mediated, and preserved reality than a mere perceptual deficiency. The foundational premise of this study is that Karbis (one among many Indigenous groups) sustain knowledge that is shared through vernacular belief practices, genre-dependent narrative modalities, placelore, human and other-than-human agencies and negotiations, etiologies, ritual knowledge, and liminal narrative worlds encompassed in sanctity, that is beyond the ordinary¹⁴ sensorial perception.

Belief¹⁵ in this study is not approached as an unconditional state of mind. Following Bowman and Valk's notion of belief emergent in multiform in different

¹³ Autonomous District Councils and Autonomous Regional Councils are autonomously administered territories for Scheduled Tribes in India, that grants them autonomy within their respective territories. The Acts of Parliament and State Legislation do not apply in these regions.

¹⁴ By 'ordinary' here, I mean the perception that is limited by the biological sciences based on five primary senses, i.e., visual, aural, oral, haptic, and olfactory.

¹⁵ "A belief, principle, or way of acting that people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time, or all of these beliefs, etc. in a particular society or group." (Source: Cambridge Online Dictionary)

expressive genres replaces belief analysis from presumed internal cognitive states to contextualized expressive practices. Primiano's "religions as it is lived," (Primiano 1995, 52) provides a methodological segue between belief as expressive genre, as religious credence, and everyday cultures where invisibility is encountered, negotiated, and transmitted. When belief is grounded in a place, they become "far more than geographical location." (Valk & Sävborg 2017, 7) It is through the place, that memory, encounter, and narrative authorities accumulate and are transmitted in cultures. Basso argues that anthropology must attend to "what people make of places." (Basso 1996, 105) It is through these place-contextual discourses that Karbis reproduce experiential presences of *Rongbin*. Following Oring's "rhetoric of truth," (Oring 2008, 130) it is the legendry through which invisibility (*Rongbin*) achieves its agency, social credibility, and consequentially, impact behavior. Supernatural in this work is implicit; a narrative pivot that anchors the experience in the telling. Following the principles of the ontological turn, the ethnography is written for the reader to "not only see things differently, but see different things." (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 6)

Finally, taken together with Ronghangpi's comprehensive work on Karbi origin narratives, this theoretical review discusses briefly how one can look at invisible landscapes produced through speech, that hold histories, function on ideologies, incite fears, and embed agencies at specific sites. *Rongbin* and invisibility thus, emerge as a contextual, structured cultural phenomenon that is sustained in belief, narrative genres, vernacular religiosity, and placelore. This review also exemplifies the analytical care required to study Indigenous religions in a world that is swiftly erasing their identities and lifeways.

3.2. On Belief

Belief in folkloristics is not seen as a static cognitive ability but a contextually expressed phenomenon. Bowman and Valk establish that belief is "multiform, appearing in various genres and expressive forms." (Bowman & Valk 2012, 13) This challenges two presumptions; first, belief being an intrinsic cognitive phenomenon that can be assessed solely based on 'belief-statements'. Second, it is precedent rather than being emergent in expressive genres. A single action can shift meaning-making, contingent on the generic makeup, for instance devotional gesture in one context, legend motif in another. (Bowman & Valk 2012, 13) The implications to study *Rongbin* are obvious, that *Rongbin* becomes culturally actionable through narratives, gestures, rituals, lived experiences,

dream narratives, and other genre competencies that warrants transmission. (Valk 2025, Personal Correspondence)

Magliocco focuses on “context and manner in which belief emerges” (Magliocco 2012, 7) extending the argument that belief can be emergent in practice. This situates *Rongbin* and invisibility at large, not as absence of knowledge but as structured uncertainty of the supernatural¹⁶ mediated through expressive acts. Primiano also warns that scholarly categorization renders belief phenomena invisible through “insistent acts of misnaming.” (Primiano 1995, 38) Thus, the folkloristic approach to analyze belief worlds and their narratives argue that the analytical categories themselves must be assessed for the invisibility that they impose on vernacular practices. Belief in this context is thus analytically followed by vernacular religion¹⁷ as it can only be accessed in everyday life where religion is lived, encountered, interpreted, and turned into practice.

3.3. On Vernacular Religion

Leonard N. Primiano, positioned the individual in the center of how religion is lived and termed this to be vernacular religion (1995, 52). This concept thus constitutes one of the methodological hinges for this study. Not only can this concept be employed to analyze the various forms of Indigenous (*Hemphu Mukrāng*, *Arong Barim*, etc.) and new religious movements that exist parallelly in Karbi Anglong, but also how people “encounter, understand, interpret, and practice” the religions in everyday life in context of *Rongbin*. (Primiano 1995, 44) In case of *Rongbin*, vernacularity not only results into a shift from mono-generic narrative formats to interpretive practices, but also contributes towards the enactment of lived frameworks that negotiate spatial behaviors, including but not limited to avoidance, reverence, and ritual.

It is also important to remain aware that residualizing lived religiosities as “folk religion” is an “extreme disservice” (Primiano 1995, 38) to an already marginalized phenomenon in a given cultural context. It is noted and avoided in this work as it can

¹⁶ Supernatural here has been used as a term to describe phenomena that are usually experienced and expressed through various expressive genres by individuals as well as communities, usually unverifiable by scientific-rationalistic tools.

¹⁷ In his book, *Science and Religion*, Bronislaw Malinowski defined religion as a set of self-fulfilling rituals and beliefs that provides comfort, cohesion, and meaning in the face of emotional distress, death, or extreme crisis and is different from magic and science. In his book *The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer defined religion as propitiation of powers superior to man that directs and controls the course of nature and human life and is a part of three stage development from magic, religion, to science. In his book, *Primitive Culture*, Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as belief in spiritual beings that attempts to explain life, death, and dreams. (Malinowski 1948/1954; Frazer 1890; Tylor 1871)

additionally contribute to make the phenomenon under study subsequently invisible by employing erstwhile scholarly categories of ‘unofficial’ practices. (Primiano 1995, 39-40) Goldstein aids in this process by situating vernacular authority¹⁸ in “narrative and local knowledge.” (Goldstein 2015, 126) Following the above line of thought, this work argues that lived religions, especially the orality-based Indigenous religions like that of the Karbis, operate through narrative circulation as can be noted in the fieldwork material and contextual expertise as opposed to systematic theology. Vernacular religion thereby becomes the analytical bridge for the genres that express, transmit, and validate, *Rongbin* and its invisibility.

3.4. On Narrative Genres

Genre in this study is not merely a categorical convenience but the primary mechanism that organizes the ethnography and its analyses. In the edited volume by Frog, Koski, and Savolainen, it is established that genre “maintains a central position” in interdisciplinary scholarly work. (Frog, Koski, & Savolainen 2016, 11) The generic framework is implicit, inherent, and methodologically substantial. For *Rongbin*, genres mediate social expectations and ontological possibilities, narrator authority, and the interdependencies of the narrator-narratee-narrative matrix.

Bennett highlights that genre is not just an academic classification but a determinant of how narratives are interpreted. (Bennett 1989, 289-91) *Rongbin* is genre-mediated. *Rongbin* exists not merely because it is believed to, but because there exist genres that can describe, debate, and normalize the claims. It occupies multiple generic registers ranging from etiological narratives, cautionary tales, memorates, ritual texts, rumor fragments among others. However, the meta-generic risk of misidentifying an Indigenous genre is high. Genre analysis in this context must remain sensitive to the fluidity that the subject itself offers. (Bennett 1989, 289–291; Dégh 1996, 33–35; Oring 2008, 129–131)

Among the Karbis, the emic narrative genres such as *keplàng-kephi àtòmò*, *arnàm-àrni àtòmò*, *munit pen marat-mareng àtòmò*, *jàngrésà àtòmò*, and *hi-pi* are structurally permeable generic expressions of the Karbi cosmology that is anchored in *pirthé keplàng alún*. (Ronghangpi 2025, 153-54) In the Karbi oral tradition, the creation

¹⁸ “Vernacular authority is granted when the agent speaks as subordinate to the institutional. Because this subordination is emergent in discourse, access to such authority is possible only in degrees as alterity from institutional power is asserted or enforced.” (Howard 2008, 497)

narrative *pirthé keplàng alún* functions as the Karbi metanarrative, structuring the “temporal and metaphysical understanding of their [Karbi] worldview.” (Ronghangpi 2025, 57) Along with being one of the creation narrative, it also functions as the origin song, ritual chant, and a healing text. (Ronghangpi 2025, 152) Karbi generic fluidity is a cosmological mandate. The Karbi narrative world is not based on “rigid boundaries like sacred or profane, human or other-than-human,” and therefore does not produce fixed genres. (Ronghangpi 2025, 61) Honko’s organic variation accounts for this to analyze orally transmitted narratives because in oral traditions, genres evolve contextually.

3.5. On Telling Legends

Legends have been one of the primary cultural mediums to transmit and preserve the discourses on invisibility. Bennett’s “belief stories” frame these as informal narratives that “illustrate current community beliefs.” (Bennett 1989, 291) This grounds the belief in performance instead of abstract narratives. For *Rongbin*, belief stories circulate the knowledge about the invisible village, but delimits what kinds of actions, peoples, and places it can possibly implicate.

Dégh however argues that “belief is an inherent part of all legends.” (Dégh 1996, 34) This reframes the question from ‘whether to believe’ to ‘how belief manifests.’ Mullen, further distinguishes a rumor from a legend wherein, a “rumor is usually brief” and may function as a “single proposition for belief.” (Mullen 1972, 96) While legends usually involve either elaborate narratives or “clusters of rumors” that pivot a specific theme. (Mullen 1972, 96) Spatially contingent invisibility navigates through a rumor-legend continuum, that range from short cautions like, “It might end up badly for you, just like it did for them” (Rengso, Interlocutor, 2025) to elaborate encounter narratives. (See Chapter: *In Search of Rongbin*) Oring’s “rhetoric of truth” (Oring 2008, 130) offers the necessary framework to look into how the legendry manages credibility, doubt, and related consequences in the face of such encounters.

3.6. On the Supernatural

Valk and Sävborg (2017) connect narrative genres to the construction of supernatural dimensions of spaces through storied expressions, crafting supernaturally storied worlds

as liminal spaces between the factual and the fiction. It is the space that is sensorially¹⁹ perceived, and is transformed in imagination. *Rongbin* therefore occupies the liminal narrative space, within which, possibility of the supernatural is sustained in its multiple forms. Bennett's belief stories preserve this trans-media proliferation through local and focused narratives that are in-line with community expectations. On the other hand, Mullen's legend-rumor continuum explains the circulation of the supernatural in its more succinct cautionary format. Further, while Dégh's argument that belief is inherent in a legend allows the supernatural to be a core phenomenon delineating disparate worlds and worldviews, Oring's truth rhetoric establishes social consequences of the supernatural. Additionally, Magliocco's emergent belief maps onto supernatural narration as a generative performance that constructs belief – connecting practice, possibilities, and re-enchantment. Put together, these approaches establish the *Rongbin* supernatural narratives to be inseparable from placelore as the meaning is found in-context (of the Karbi ontology).

3.7. On the Ontological Turn and Placelore

The ontological turn is the overarching methodological frame for this study as a study on invisible landscapes cannot presuppose what kinds of beings and agencies can exist. Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism argues that the "world is inhabited by different kinds of subjects" that perceive their reality from "distinct points of views." (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 469) This establishes invisibility as perspectival. His emphasis on perspectivist "multinaturalism" as opposed to relativist "multiculturalism" underlines the ontological stakes at play in this work. *Rongbin* presents different natures, beings, and their agencies: not merely a rehash of a singularity. (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 472) Further, Holbraad and Pedersen's fundamental principle that anthropology must develop the ability to "see different things" (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 6) is embodied in the structure of this thesis rather than simply being a subscript to the ethnography.

Finally, it is in placelore that the ontological plurality gets tangibly embedded. Valk and Sävborg argue that placelore is temporally layered and is "in constant formation." (Valk & Sävborg 2017, 10) Thus, places accumulate memories, encounters,

¹⁹ Proposed by Sarah Pink (2009), *Sensorial Ethnography* seeks to rethink the entire ethnographic process through multisensoriality wherein the perception is the sum of sensory experiences of both the researcher and the participant, the place is considered as the multisensory event, knowledge is the inclusive of the sensory experiences, and memory and imagination simultaneously construct and project experiences of one's environment [and other-than-humans].

and the consequential narrative authorities over generations. Basso highlights how place-discourse brings invisible worlds from oblivion to being experientially present, “it’s like, we were there.” (Basso 1996, 13) Employed together, the ontological turn and placelore offer the spatial and philosophical backbone through which *Rongbin* is observed and analyzed to be culturally consequential, spatially contingent, and ethically irreducible. (Tilley 1994; Basso 1996, 13-14, 105; Valk & Sävborg 2017, 7-10; Goldstein 2015, 126; Basso 1996, 13-14, 105)

3.8. Synthesizing Invisibility

The review of the theoretical frames is presented prior to the ethnography to highlight how the invisible landscape, *Rongbin* and the notion of invisibility is treated in this study. In its broadest sense, it is treated as a cultural formation wherein the most consequential dimensions of a place including but not restricted to its moral histories, ancestral presences, other-than-human agencies, sacred powers, supernatural encounters, and more may not be directly physically or immediately perceptible. These features are rather sensed to be tangible enough to frame cultural emotions, actions, identities, and interpretations around it. *Rongbin(s)* in this study, are therefore considered as place-worlds that emerge at the intersection of Indigenous belief and their vernacular genre-specific expressions, legendry, and placelore, enveloped with an ontological openness. The invisibility is not an absence of a feature but is constitutive of *Rongbin*. While the structural invisibility here is treated as such, without extrapolating its consequences, the interpretative frames that looked at the invisibility as a sociological commentary has been derived in a separate section. This is a decision that has been taken to avoid conflation of interpretations and mark a clear distinction between how the invisibility is treated among the Karbis and how can it be interpreted outside of these contextual capabilities.

4. In Search of *Rongbin*

4.1. The *Rongbin* Review

Although scarce, the following section summarizes the available scholarship on *Rongbin* by Karbi scholars. The book, *The Mythhistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park*, edited by Dharamsing Teron and Vulli Dhanaraju not only presents the Karbi origin of the Kaziranga National Park, but also includes one of the few available texts on brief description of *Rongbin*. However, this book also inspires a much deeper insight into the Karbi worldview and meaning-making processes than merely describing *Rongbin*. In the segment by Anjana Engtipi, she highlights the importance of oral narratives in the Karbi society and enlists them within the frames of known folklore genres such as – folktales, folk songs, ballads, myths, and legends. She highlights that “throughout the ages, the rich tapestry of Karbi history has been passed down from generation to generation. This sacred tradition of storytelling has found its expression in the enchanting melodies of narrative songs.” (Engtipi 2024, 98) The role of sacredness in the narrative of *Rongbin*, through its association with territorial deities and other such entities has managed to sustain it in the oral traditions.

However, what becomes interesting in the case of *Rongbin* is the range of folkloric genres it involves. Based on the present ethnography, *Rongbin* exemplifies generic fluidity in folklore. But orality for the Karbis is not merely a genre of expression. “The Karbi understanding of interacting with the supernatural realm, particularly for the purpose of healing, centers on the concept of *Sé*. This term encompasses various forms of communication with unseen powers, including voice, sound, word, speech, or vocalization.” (Dhanaraju & Teron 2025, 74) Further, a core feature of the Karbi indigenous community is their interpretation, negotiation, and navigation of the ecology. This aspect becomes critical in situating the narrative of *Rongbin* embodied in the ecological surrounding through the Karbi traditional ecological knowledge. In other words, “one of the common significant features of all these indigenous tribes is that they are the worshippers of nature and ecology. And that has played a great role in shaping their traditional way of living, culture, beliefs, and traditions.” (Dhanaraju & Lama 2024, 178) Karbi scholars underline that *Totemism* is one of the key aspects of the Karbi religious tapestry. (Teron & Dhanaraju 2024; Dhanaraju & Teron 2025; Teron & Dhanaraju 2026) And the elements in their ecological surrounding are each ascribed exclusive Karbi belief-features that help them be mapped to narratives, practices, and rituals.

Thus, “according to Karbi ancestors, the hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, and other natural features are considered living entities and are believed to be under the ownership of invisible spirits.” (Dhanaraju & Teron 2025, 128) These ascriptions however are not recent; the Karbi’s “intricately intertwined” connection with nature “can be attributed to the presence of origin narratives, namely dealing with creation myths, generally referred to as *Kepláng*.” (Dhanaraju & Lama 2024, 182) Thus, it is through these interspersed categories of animistic belief, eco-cosmology, etiological narratives, totemic divinity, placelore, and uncanny experiences, as identified by Karbi scholars, that *Rongbin* has been discussed in text, insofar. In Vulli Dhanaraju and Dharamsing Teron’s words, who call the *Rongbin* tale an “ecological tale of ‘angry spirits’ that spark endless wonder about ancestral wisdom,”

“In Karbi lore, ‘Rongbin’ is a popular myth of an invisible village, its inhabitants possessing the power of invisibility. Fragments of the myth tell of lost travelers rescued, sheltered, and returned home. Only a select few are said to enter and leave this hidden realm. The fortunate are warned against looking back until safe, lest they find themselves lost again. Encounters with ‘Rongbin’ are deemed divinely ordained. In ancient times, ‘Rongbin’ residents, kin to Karbi ancestors, appeared and disappeared at will, attending rituals and feasts. Outsiders could borrow festive garments, to be returned. Some were granted permanent access to ‘Rongbin,’ requiring them to ‘leave’ their bodies. Outsider greed and dishonesty severed this connection. Yet, the allure of ‘Rongbin’ persists, a surreal parallel world or consciousness. Tales of a parallel reality, perhaps another dimension, remain beyond modern comprehension. Karbi ancestors envisioned a world within this reality, free of killing, where all beings are treated with respect and compassion.” (Dhanaraju & Teron 2025, 137-38)

The above description ascribes *Rongbin* myth-like characteristics. Another dimension that Karbi scholars have employed to understand *Rongbin* is the Karbi response to crises or violence. The Karbi non-violent worldview has been misappropriated and misrepresented in erstwhile scholarship, especially in the colonial thesis as being ‘timid, unwarlike, and scared.’ (Stack & Lyall 1908) The trend continues to date, especially when these colonial texts are regularly cited by contemporary scholars. However, the Karbi philosophy of non-violence extends beyond the immediate realms of geo-political or inter-clan conflicts. In other words,

“The non-violent world of the Karbis is not far to seek... ‘Rongbin’, which existed/exists in a parallel reality of peace and plenty. Ritual propitiation of the spirits of Rongbin has continued till this day

as modern day Karbis seek protection from enemies and calamities. This utopian worldview of the Karbi ancestors of a peaceful world may appear too fabulous and surreal, but this nevertheless demonstrates the Karbi peoples' urge for a world without violence. Generations of Karbis have lived with the romantic idea of recovering the lost Rongbin. In fact, they nurse the hope that someday, they will. As such – each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it. In some localities, propitiation of the Rongbin spirits is also performed as a part of community Rongker ritual when a host of protective territorial spirits is worshipped.” (Dhanaraju & Teron 2025, 184-85)

Lastly, from mythical narratives and enacting Karbi non-violence through *Rongbin*, Dr Kareng Ronghangpi gives the first brief account of *Rongbin* based on ethnography. In her exposition, *Rongbin* is taken out of the realms of a distant myth and finds its mention through placelore. She writes, “Rongbin is a space that exists among us... Rongbin is an invisible village located in the dense forest of Inglongkiri mountain.” (Ronghangpi 2024, 300) With a location ascribed, *Rongbin* shifts from the genre of myth to that of a legend. She further adds, “According to Mr. Ronghang, this village used to be a normal village but because of brutal conflict with different tribes, some of the villages decided to bind the community using sacred chants to make the village invisible to the outsider. To clarify, outsiders here also include those Karbi who do not belong to that village. There have been cases where people have narrated their experiences of meeting an individual from Rongbin.” (Ronghangpi 2024, 300) Stating that the invisible village once used to be a ‘normal’ village evokes a sense of familiarity and closeness. From a distant mythical world, *Rongbin* becomes situated materially, in the Karbi geography. After situating *Rongbin* in place, Dr Ronghangpi moves to discuss a few experience narratives. “Such persons [those who have experienced *Rongbin*] have followed the people of *Rongbin* on the basis of an invitation issued by a village member of *Rongbin* and if they follow the instructions, it is said that they would reach home safely or find themselves in the dense forest in case they violate their instructions.” (Ronghangpi 2024, 300) Elements such as ‘invitations’ and ‘instructions’ bring the narrative closer to the Karbi lifeways that are backgrounded by negotiations with other-than-humans and norms that regulate those negotiations. Finally, the *Rongbin* discourse by Dr Ronghangpi finds itself moving towards the uncanny and narrating the supernatural through encounter stories. She writes,

“Sighting of women during dawn nearby Elaichi Bagan, Langmili, Silveta, East Karbi Anglong and disappearing in the dense forest... Mr. Tokbi proceeded to show me the ritual text used for Rongbin,

to make a village disappear when asked can you make your village disappear with this ritual, he replied, 'this is not in the pure form so it will not make the village disappear but will help partially, for instance, it will make an individual from different village hallucinate or diverge from the location if they attempt to find the village... Rongbin people do not have a fixed locality; they keep shifting their village according to their needs or circumstances... The hidden village still exists on the other side of his teak farm at Jok'an Anglong. Occasionally, their presence is felt through sounds and voices, such as people talking or walking. An anonymous informant from Diphu told me about an incident that happened four years ago which made a headline in the local news, an individual from a village fell in love with a girl from Rongbin. According to the family of the boy, they have been speaking for 4-5 years, and they have been meeting in the stream where they first met and only the boy could see the lady from Rongbin. And later they went to the place where they were invited by the people of Rongbin, 'although they couldn't see them, they could hear their voices.' (Ronghangpi 2024, 300-301)

Several aspects of *Rongbin* were included in this short text by Dr Ronghangpi. These included placelore, the legendry, supernatural narrative, transgression of one of the Karbi ritual components of *Sé* (voice), and a much-tabooed wedlock between members of *Rongbin* and Karbis, among others. Each of these aspects require separate attention and delineation to fully realize the creation, continuation, and consequences of *Rongbin*. In her own words, “This is all that has been written about *Rongbin* so far. You will find small pieces written by *Lokhai* (Dharamsing Teron) and something by The'ang. But that is about it. Yours will be the first comprehensive work on *Rongbin*. You will be finally taking it forward.” (Ronghangpi 2025, Personal Correspondence) This thesis tries not to write off *Rongbin* as a distant fantastical myth but within grounded, recursive, and engaged ethnography together with a combination of community-led and scholarly analysis. This study does not feel an “inferiority complex” studying what is “on the ground,” (Noyes 2008, 37) rather, attempts to practically “address that middle territory between grand theory and local interpretation.” (Noyes 2008, 41) And as a “humble” text on *Rongbin* and invisibility, this text does not “leapfrog” from the local to a “transcendental meaning” using the theories by asking the “Why-questions” but, addresses the organic variations in “transmission modalities, performance, and differentiation” in-context by asking the more important and humbler, “How-questions.” (Noyes 2008, 41)

4.2. The First Ethnography: Villages That Were Encountered²⁰

“Once you start dreaming about it, you need to know that it has taken a liking towards you...” (Rengso (Interlocutor), Karbi Anglong, 2025)

4.2.1. Preface: On the Ethics of Writing What Resists Textualizing

Ethnographic accounts regularly perform a narrative arc that has a consistent transition from confusion to clarity where the fieldworker arrives, perseveres, and finally illuminates the knowledge from the about-to-disappear cultures. This arc is highly fictional. What follows here is an attempt to write a different account, one in which the incompleteness and confusion is constitutive rather than residual. *Rongbin*, a complex of Karbi beliefs, narratives, rituals, and other practices around an ‘invisible landscape’ or ‘village’ resists a completionist account that a conventional ethnography usually pursues. Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, some of my interlocutors’ names have been anonymized with random Karbi names. I use “*Rongbin*” with explicit and direct permission from my interlocutors and emic scholars. Especially according to Dharamsing Teron, “Only ‘Rong’ will be inappropriate and misleading - so using *Rongbin* will relate culturally.” (Teron 2026, Personal Correspondence) Ritual texts have been excluded as they were not shared at this point. The structure of the ethnography is intentional. There is an intentional epistemological distance that helped me stay grounded while writing and not be immersed in the material. The understanding emerged through extensive discussions with both, the interlocutors and my supervisors.

4.2.2. Part 1: What I was Searching, and What I Found

My original research plan focused on placelore and legends in Northeast India, a framework in which “a symbiotic relationship between tradition, communities, and their environment, between tangible reality and the storyworld” (Valk & Sävborg 2018, 9) proposed a productive continuation of my previous work with the Khasis. However, soon enough, my path shifted, as the research assistant to Dr Lyngdoh, my supervisor. My initial familiarity with the Karbi Tibeto-Burmese group came through assisting her on her fieldwork.

I arrived in Diphu in late January 2025 with Dr Lyngdoh. My primary contact was Dr Kareng Ronghangpi (Rengso), a University of Tartu alumnus and Karbi scholar, who

²⁰ All the excerpts used in chapter: *In Search of Rongbin* are edited and cleaned for a smoother reading experience. The content and meanings have not been modified at any point. Cadence is kept as close to that of the interlocutors as possible.

agreed to help me in my research. At Rongchingbar village, interlocutors Kaet Derapi and Welson Teron dedicated three hours discussing *Chékéma* affliction, *Péng* rituals, and supernatural encounters that would have become my research originally. A reference to these narratives matters here, not for their content but for what they disclosed structurally, the Karbi negotiatory approach towards other-than-human entities, and a growing recognition that the more significant aspect in every account was the subsequent ritual, not the hauntings:

There is this field in the back of this compound as well. We have not yet constructed anything there. We first need to perform the *Kārkli*. But the extended half of that section, we don't even go there. There is no point to disturb the malevolent spirits unless we actually need to establish an agreement.

The intangible was slowly becoming tangible. It was during the next visit, to entrepreneur Sabina that a formal logic was established across the narratives.

4.2.3. Part 2: The Village Without Sound

The first clear articulation of *Rongbin* emerged at Sabina's non-government organization, that works to preserve traditional Karbi textile production. “‘*Bin*’ means without sound,” we were told, “or more precisely, what is hidden. And ‘*Rong*’ as you already know is the Karbi word for a village.” Thus, *Rongbin* was literally, the invisible village.²¹ The immediate response to our subsequent questions followed quickly, “Not abandoned. It is totally accessible. Exists just like any other village that we can see and visit. Perhaps we can visit one which is nearby. We already have a *Kurusar* (ritual priest) who knows this *Rongbin* location.”²²

This stopped the analytical path that I was already on, in my mind. The village was neither a ruin, nor symbolic, nor a memorial site. It was a living community that practiced a deliberate agency over the visibility of the space they inhabited. From this first encounter, the decision has been active, visibility is conditional, the hiddenness is procedural. To translate this directly to the vocabulary of ‘belief in’ or ‘symbolic representation of’ would devoid *Rongbin* of its analytical significance. Holbraad and Pedersen’s core methodological argument is consequential here, “the turn to ontology treats the ethnography above all, as their source,” (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 6) wherein the material itself becomes the analytical leverage that informs the existing categorial

²¹ Sabina (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

²² Sabina (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

frameworks, transforming them. *Rongbin* does not require to be delineated through existing frameworks, but it questions the adequacy of those frameworks.

Subsequent encounters only added on to the picture. Rengso described the village spatially, “It is almost like a dream. You will first see *Rongbin* in your dreams. It will call to you.”²³ And when I asked whether *Rongbin* could be entered, she said, “Yes. But you cannot enter the village ‘just like that.’ *Rongbin* has to choose to receive you.”²⁴ Dharamsing Teron, insisted on its present reality, “It is a living village, with Karbis in it. Karbis who eat, work, sleep, exactly like we do.” He added, “But how we reach there may be different based on what your intentions are.”²⁵ Each interlocutor account we heard was prefaced by, “We have known about *Rongbin* from our grandparents. It has always been there.”²⁶

In Rengso’s words, “It stays hidden... Or they [people from *Rongbin*] will confuse us and everything.”²⁷ The variations across the accounts were never presented as a defect that needed resolution. Vernacular religion scholarship has established that a comparatively more appropriate unit of analysis is religion “as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.” (Primiano 1995, 44) Further, Primiano’s position that “it is impossible for the religion of an individual to not be vernacular” is directly applicable in this context. Each variant was formulated through an exclusively relational and experiential engagement with specific features of *Rongbin*. However, what every account shared without any apprehension was an unambiguous conviction in *Rongbin*’s feature of invisibility. *Rongbin* was not a metaphorical bedtime story. The claims were always sincerely ontological.

Part 3: The Hill to the Other Side

On February 7 2025, a group of approximately twelve including, Dr Lyngdoh, Rengso, Sabina Teronpi, *Kurusar* Dhoniram, myself, our fieldwork helper Eben, and six members of Sabina’s organization walked towards *Rongbin*. Rengso translated Dhoniram’s preface as we approached our location, “So, there are always things, that they will not disclose... For example, their house, yeah. All the locations. They...”²⁸ Dr Lyngdoh completed,

²³ Rengso (Interlocutor), unrecorded discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

²⁴ Rengso (Interlocutor), unrecorded discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

²⁵ Dhoniram (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

²⁶ Several interlocutors, in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

²⁷ Rengso (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

²⁸ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

“Hide?” “Hide. It [all] stays hidden. Or they will confuse us and everything. That is what he, the *Kurusar* has said. So, we are going towards the village. But we do not know if we can see anything.” As we walked forward, pointing towards a cluster of trees with exposed roots and a weathered stone near a partly forested area, Rengso translated for us as Dhoniram spoke, “This. This is the foundation.” It was not an instruction. It was said as someone noting an arrangement that they found satisfying. Dr Lyngdoh, “Is it possible to go inside from here?” Rengso points out to a man says, “So this guy, look. He has taken a banana leaf. But I do not know why, we will have to ask.” A woman offered the explanation, “Oh! He is going to offer a prayer. And *after* that we can go [inside].” One of the members shared her experience as we walked, “So, I dream about this sometimes.”²⁹ “Really?” “[Yes] I can talk about right now, after looking [seeing it in person] at it [now].” Rengso joins in the conversation, “Maggie, we were meant to be here.” About thirty minutes into the walk, the acoustic and visual quality of the space shifted. The sounds of birds and conversations was replaced by that of crumbling leaves underfoot. The canopy became denser and changed its shade from orange to green. Dhoniram stopped. “This is our starting point,”³⁰ He said in a register that was quieter yet more deliberate and articulate than ordinary speech, definitely not a whisper, but a mode of address that was appropriate to the kind of place. “Haan! [Yes] Starting point of the territory.” Rengso adds. A huge boulder was identified as the gateway to enter the forest, and a stone was placed as a marker.

I could not sense any shift in my feelings or perception about the place. However, I could sense others’ expectations, excitement, anxiety. Although a mild but consistent disorientation settled in as we walked. Whether this was a genuine perceptual shift to an objective feature of *Rongbin* or the result of preceding days of priming by interlocutors, I cannot claim with confidence. However, what started as a brief disclaimer that, “apparently once we start the journey, we cannot go back, we must keep walking in a single direction,”³¹ turned out to be the beginning of the most intriguing journey filled with anxieties, laughter, stories, knowledge, and much more.

²⁹ Interlocutor, in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

³⁰ Dhoniram (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

³¹ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

4.2.4. Part 4: The Ritual Threshold

We circled a part of the hill repeatedly without finding the veneration spot. “We must find the spot for veneration of the territorial deity. They already know the spot, but somehow, we are unable to find it today. We will either be stuck here or have to return if we cannot find this spot for venerating the territorial deity. We cannot enter the forest only, let alone *Rongbin*.”³² With three attempts of searching that failed miserably and cramping legs, our guides continued to move without any anxiety and complete attention, searching and consulting with the forest, rather than merely examining it. Pink argues that sensorial ethnography requires the researcher to understand fieldwork experiences as multi-sensory engagement in which the body’s knowledge carries independent weight. (Pink 2009, 96) After the first iteration itself, my body knew we had passed the particular part of the path before. But our guides’ bodies registered something different each time, finding different grounding at each iteration of the walk, some quality of the place that was not ready to be declared yet. Rengso explained afterwards that we could not have entered the hill if *Rongbin* would not have wanted us there. *Rongbin* was exercising its agency as a landscape, “acting in a straightforward manner.” (Valk & Sävborg 2018, 8) *Rongbin*, that day, was not the location of our walk, but a participant in it.

Dégh posits that “the articulation of culture-specific, religion-specific truth by individuals is our guide to the understanding of belief at the heart of the legend,” (Dégh 2001, 318) “... [and] irrespective of the extent of the underlying truth, it is the extent of the believability that carries the day.” (Dégh 2001, 38) The circling was not a test of credulity in Dégh’s sense, but an active production of the conditions in which the question of ‘believability’ paves way to understand whether the seeker possessed the mode that the encounter required. The ‘judgement’ function as argued by Oring was enacted spatially here instead of narratively. That the legendary narrators establish themselves as “sober, perceptive, and critical individuals, not given to fantasy or gullibility.” (Oring 2008, 135) That the conditions of narrative production needed to be achieved before *Rongbin* could be walked any further was validated through their sobriety and being grounded in shared histories of trauma and encounters.

About an hour later, when we had almost given up the plan, one of the men called from atop a boulder up front. There was some commotion and soon we were told, “We found the altar.” A fourth pass through the same path followed, only this time, with an

³² Rengso (Interlocutor), unrecorded discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

unexpected upward turn. It led us to a massive boulder-like structure that already had remnants of being an altar. Dhoniram, “Please leave your shoes a bit further away from the altar area.”³³ As we walked closer, I whispered to Dr Lyngdoh, “We had crossed this exact part, every single time, just never bothered to climb up. If you look down, you can see where we were resting all this while”.

4.2.5. Part 5: The Ritual Performed

Dhoniram produced from his *Jamborong*³⁴, a pre-organized set of materials: banana leaves, incense sticks, oil, betel leaves and nuts, and a small earthen lamp. He arranged them at the altar base with deliberate spatial attention. Each item placed relationally to the other. An arrangement that suggested emic logic which I could observe but not analyze yet. He lit the incense and lamp, addressed the altar, *Rongbin*, and the territorial deity, *Longsāng Mukrāng*. We were then asked to participate.

Pink’s position on sensory intersubjectivity highlights that research encounters produce an engagement that involve “the role of sensory perception in how we interpret and interact with others; the implications of sensory intersubjectivity for understanding the research encounter; and the ethnographer's quest to share sensory experiences with research participants, attempting to apprehend their experiences and seeking to communicate about them with them through this sharing.” (Pink 2009, 63) The ritual elicited exclusive sensory data, smell of incense, Dhoniram’s ritual register, the stillness of the space and people. The deafening sound of the crumbling leaves have faded into gusts of quiet winds. Rengso translated the protective function of Dhoniram’s ritual objects that he carried in addition to the veneration items:

...Today also he came actually prepared. He even brought eggs. Like, he has also prepared a special chant. You know to, like in case, you get to go there. Because, if we get there you know, sometimes what happens is that, you might have to stay. They might not allow you to return... So, he brought this egg, so if something like that happens today, then he can use this special chant and return. So that we do not get concerned if he suddenly disappears from in front of us.³⁵

Kurusar Dhoniram also carried some rice in a tiny plastic bag. The egg and rice were ritual materials that were embedded with ritual value. They were tangible evidence of him belonging in the visible world to the invisible people. Magliocco’s argument “that sacredness [of the natural world and its manifestations] is present in every living thing,

³³ Dhoniram (Interlocutor), unrecorded discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

³⁴ *Jamborong* is a Karbi traditional handbag.

³⁵ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

and in inanimate natural objects such as stones, trees, rivers, and the earth itself; and on the sense that all things are interconnected. Internalizing this principle leads, ideally, to considering the impact of one's every action upon one's immediate and not-so-immediate environment,” (Magliocco 2004, 114) holds this material dimension of belief not supplementary to the verbal or narrative aspect but contributive to it. The items were not *symbols* of protection, but protection themselves, enacted through culture-specific material forms.

Frog’s four-aspect genre framework, that “form, content/enactment and practice operate as a system, and no one aspect can change without impacting the others because they are reciprocally informative in constructing the genre for its users. Use of a genre is inevitably correlative with intention,” (Frog 2016, 67) was in application here. The ritual at the altar was not merely a cosmological expectation but enactment of a relational protocol while its truth-conditions were embodied in the performance. The question was then, not whether the veneration was accurate, but if it was accepted. As it happened, it was.

4.2.6. Part 6: Conversations, Origins, and the *Rongbin* Cosmology

After the ritual, we gathered around the altar for a group discussion. This was the first sustained, unhasty, structured discussion on *Rongbin*. What is written here is a thematically organized account of that discussion. A linear transcription would have been confusing. Most of the conversation was in Karbi, translated by Rengso. Rengso’s translation of Dhoniram, opens the dialogue,

So, he said that, since the time of our ancestors, we have always been hearing that there is *Rongbin*, from our grandparents. But we do not know where that place is. So today, at this place, this ritual marks the offering, so that the territorial deity of this hill can give us strength and energy for us to be able to come to a conclusion, that is, to either visit the *Rongbin* here, or at least have a sighting. Although you do not encounter the people of *Rongbin*, you can often hear the voice of them speaking or the fowls or other animals. However, there are some occasions where there have been sightings of people. But that is quite rare.³⁶

This temporal claim also functioned as a caution, so that *Rongbin* is not merely misread as just an outcome human practice whether ritualized or narrativized, but also as a geographical feature that exists towards which human intentions and practices are directed. At this point, *Rongbin* was still narrated as something beyond intentional human

³⁶ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

engagements apart from chance encounters. The deliberate ontological stratification and engagement arrived much later. Rengso continued,

The location that we are in, does have a *Rongbin*. And yes, according to our grandfather, the people from *Rongbin*, they are also like the same people who stay in sight [in the visible reality]. It is just so that we cannot see them. They somehow vanish and then you cannot find them. So, if you want to visit their village, you must seek the permission of [their] territorial deity before you can enter there.³⁷

And this was followed by explicitly highlighting *Rongbin*'s distinctive features,

What is special is the difference in the abilities that they [people of *Rongbin*] have achieved and we have not. What to say? Kind of what can be called as, 'black magic.' They can also transform themselves into various animals like wild boar, deer, wild birds, and so on as and when required. That is what is special about them. And the most important ability that they have is that of invisibility. Magical powers.³⁸

Dharamsing Teron's later delineation on the matter is offered as a precise emic analysis, "Invisibility does not just mean hidden away from the eyes or non-existence or an absence. It highlighted the presence of a knowledge that is beyond our current comprehension and skill."³⁹

Viveiros de Castro's ideas about perspectivism argues that Amerindian ontologies represent not a culturally different view of the same world but a "different world altogether," that is organized on different principles. (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 472) The *Rongbin* proposition as offered by the community, that presence and visibility are disjointed, and that a visible landscape can be superimposed by the presence of an invisible one, is an exact empirical manifestation of that claim. To translate it as the 'Karbi's symbolic attachment to their landscape through the *concept* of an invisible village' is not an analysis but an epistemic violence that "perspectivism" highlights. Holbraad and Pedersen insist that the researcher must allow the ethnography to "transform the analytical concepts" (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 6) than be explained away by them. *Rongbin*'s refusal to be framed only either as a social construct or physical entity is not an obstacle to analysis but the beginning of it.

4.2.7. Part 7: On Origins and Possessions

Interlocutor Rasong also knew of *Rongbin* to be present on that particular hill through a combination of general Karbi knowledge, persistent personal research, and occasional

³⁷ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

³⁸ Dhoniram (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

³⁹ Dharamsing Teron, Personal Correspondence with the author, February 2025

events that had introduced new knowledge onto him. On the origin of this village, he mentions,

In the beginning, before *Rongbin* was created, those people were also regular Karbis. But in time, this particular group of Karbis became high intellectuals by gaining the knowledge of higher forms of magic, especially those that involved becoming invisible. Therefore, during that time, they got into conflicts and separated. That is how they formed *Rongbin*.⁴⁰

The event that drew his attention to this specific hill was his relative's possession by the territorial deity mentioned earlier, *Longsāng Mukrāng*. The possession events had provisioned him with knowledge on *Rongbin*. Not only did it involve the knowledge of the location but also traversal protocols; for instance, that the entry is safe in even-numbered groups as the one additional person in an odd-numbered group is always kept by *Rongbin*.⁴¹ A feature that was extended in practice wherein, the number of people who were walking that day totaled to exactly at twelve. Oring argues, "If a commentary is offered on the significance of events, it strongly suggests that such events occurred." (Oring 2008, 151) Rasong's relative's persistent possessions and *Kurusar* Dhoniram's emergent *Rongbin* vocabulary resulted into a lasting impact on the behavior, implying the truth of the original encounter. Rasong's knowledge was neither transmitted through codified doctrine, nor through ordained specialists. It was transmitted through an unwarranted event, a relative's possession followed by a familial need to mediate its consequences.

Primiano's argument that, "the creativity of uniculture is particularly manifest in the parallel creative activity of vernacular religion," (Primiano 1995, 50) establishes this as vernacular religious knowledge in its most foundational, creative forms: grounded in tradition, manifested in experience, and validated through the consequences. This account thus, places the Karbis in a relational field with the landscape and its protector, not only because they sought it but they were granted access by it.

4.2.8. Part 8: The Social Ontology of *Rongbin*

Anyone can learn to become invisible and therefore join the people of *Rongbin*. But it is also kind of horrible. Because everything we do here, in this reality has its own sound, weaving, husking, all activities. But they do not have these sounds there. So, we will have to give it all up to be there. There are also possibilities that we get stuck in *Rongbin*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

⁴¹ Rengso (Translator), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

⁴² Rengso and Dhoniram (Interlocutor), in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

Another interlocutor, through Rengso, confirmed that he had been to this particular *Rongbin* although the people had already moved elsewhere. However, while he had not seen the village or the people, he was aware that they often return to take forgotten items. Another one adds that the encounters with *Rongbin* people most commonly occur after sunset when identifying someone by their face is almost impossible. It is also mentioned that the people of *Rongbin* befriend you, claim to be from a certain village, and soon you would be enchanted and start to walk with them, hearing their stories. Soon, you would get drowsy, fall asleep, and find yourself atop a boulder in a forest when you wake. Dhoniram adds, “I have also heard that these people from *Rongbin* have cat-eyes.”

We continue to discuss additional features, including marriage prohibition. “Because of the conflict that separated the *Rongbin* people from the Karbis, the people from here [visible reality] cannot marry anyone from *Rongbin*. It can also be said that this is so because they hold a higher form of knowledge than we do.” Dr Lyngdoh asks in response, “Would you then say that *Rongbin* is perhaps a domain of knowledge?” Rengso, “Yes, it is. Because they know much more than we do.” An additional point emerges, that of being detained by *Rongbin* or made invisible. “If you have malice in your heart, if you have ulterior motives, *Rongbin* will judge you. And then you will get stuck there. They will then make you work hard until you become worthy of returning to the visible reality.” We were almost about to wrap up our conversations when I added a little question for clarity, “I understand that *Longsāng Mukrāng* is the territorial deity. But could you share maybe who exactly he is? Do you know?” Dhoniram responds, “He is just like *Sivā*.” I made a quick note of this. A critical point that extends on the complexity of the Karbi religious landscape that would soon be analyzed by another interlocutor.

Each narrative implied strongly that *Rongbin* was populated; has always been. This informs what in Oring’s truth-rhetoric of the legendry is the ‘reflexivity’ device wherein, while “other aesthetic effects may influence believability. Foreshadowing [of *Rongbin* being populated] refers to the arrangement of events and ideas in narrative so that later events are anticipated and prepared for.” (Oring 2008, 155) *Rongbin* in all narratives was about people, working, eating, sleeping, visiting markets, befriending others. They were not spirits in the senses that the Karbi cosmology identified. They were just people occupying the same physical reality but in a different register of existence that made them inaccessible to ordinary perception. However, to establish ontological credibility, sightings – not alarming but incidental – were consistent and established the Karbi expression of ontological overlap.

Viveiros de Castro's argument that "bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such," (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 478) provides a structural framework to the marriage prohibition. People from *Rongbin* and those who were not from it, occupy different 'natures' as they occupy the same world in disparate registers of existence, and a permanent relationship is structurally unavailable across such boundaries. These are neither social prohibition, nor religious taboos but ontological restrictions. These chance encounters and sociological restrictions reaffirm Dégh's legendary dialectic that, legends are not merely recorded events but also contribute towards creating interpretive frameworks within which experiences become legible – that these do not generate new legends but reaffirm existing knowledge wherein "uncovering the ways of telling [Rongbin experiences] discover the ways of meaning," that *Rongbin* holds for the Karbis. (Bennett 1999, 117)

4.2.9. Part 9: The Illusive Return

As we walked ahead, *Rongbin* emerged in genres of evidence than revelations, a crucial analytical distinction. We never encountered the actual village. We merely encountered signs of it. A cluster of cave-like structures that were identified as *Rongbin* dwellings, not metaphorically, but as organized living spaces in the other register of existence. Basso's analysis of how named places are embedded with moral and historical knowledge become accessible through active and attentive engagement (Basso 1996, 81) can be noticed to be in enaction here. The vernacular knowledge did not produce the village but made visible, the evidences that validated its existence. An uninformed visitor would have probably travelled the same forest without noticing anything anomalous.

As we cleared the boundary of the forest, I stopped briefly to look back. I had heard the sound of a large pile of leaves falling, near the forest's edge. I described it to the others. I wanted to stay and investigate further but was asked to leave. Later, I was told, "We could not have stopped. You could have gotten stuck there. If it [*Rongbin*] takes a liking towards you, you will disappear. You should not have looked back either."⁴³ The trip ended on a cautionary note, the meaning and foundations of which would only get clarified in the next fieldwork.

Our walk through *Rongbin*, did not produce a theory about it, rather a theory towards its knowability. The marking of the entrance, circling the hill, the ritual, stories

⁴³ Rengso (Interlocutor) unrecorded discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2025

told, encounters with the caves, and the rushed departure – all of it constituted what can be called a ‘belief event’ within what Bennett calls “tradition of belief.” (Bennett 1999, 38) An event that is distributed across a complex of agents, multisensorial modality, expressive genres, and temporal frames. And none of these complexes simplified the event into a singular generalizable claim. It was belief embodied in practice, and the practice as an enactment of belief, neither having a priority over the other. While the distinction was slowly becoming clearer, between treating Indigenous knowledge as object of analysis versus treating it as a subject of engagement, the first trip left many questions unanswered, that were only addressed during the second fieldwork. The subsequent fieldwork discussions in 2025 repeated the same set of information, barring any particular association with the specific hill we walked. *Rongbin* was highlighted by the remaining interlocutors as an invisible village that has been talked about for generations; that there are occasional sightings of people from there; that if you encounter *Rongbin*, you might get stuck inside if you have malicious intent, and so on. However, the point that the *Rongbin* people might have had possible conflict with the *visible* Karbis, seemed to emerge strongly through the narratives that were shared. This implored a dedicated exploration into Karbi historical experience of war and trauma, however, that was deferred for the next fieldwork.

4.3. The Year of Synthesis

“I have such amazing new stories for you when you come back next year. It will help your work a lot.” (Rengso [Interlocutor], Tartu, 2025)

4.3.1. Part 10: Fieldwork Continued

The first fieldwork ended in late February 2025. Upon return, as I shared the several stories I had learned, my supervisors’ advice to focus on *Rongbin* as a promising phenomenon for research and their caution to not get too close to the topic had taken hold both as a motivation and an unresolvable complexity that I had to navigate. I presented in six conferences between 2025 and 2026, almost every presentation being on *Rongbin*, however, never naming it as such. Primiano’s argument that religious life as practiced, “radiates and influences the surrounding environments” (Primiano 1995, 44) without getting subsumed within external categories was being enacted at a scholarly level. Withholding the name was not just a methodological decision that was consistent with many interlocutors’ request at that point, to preserve its secrecy and sanctity from a fresh scholar who might not show up ever again, but also a personal show of respect towards

their concerns and not be dismissive of it. Goldstein’s argument that narrative organizes how people evaluate knowledge and action, (Goldstein 2015, 127) was confirmed by the (re)presentational constraints where the empirical was entirely carried by the analytical in all my presentations.

Constant communication with interlocutors, who had by then, become friends, clarified my enquiries and deepened my understanding between the formal visits. At the symposium on ‘Vernacular Knowledge and Indigenous Traditions: Perspectives from Fieldwork’ in Tartu, after presenting *Rongbin* through the lens of placelore as “sites of memories and venues of extraordinary encounters in storytelling” (Valk & Sävborg 2018, 7), I called Rengso. I was informed of a phenomenon that both fit and exceeded the current frame I was aware of. Turned out, *Rongbin* was not merely a site that existed, but one that could be created. The conversation ensured a completely new course for this research, transitioning *Rongbin* from the realms of the legendry to that of the ritualized.

4.3.2. Part 11: A New Set of Memorates

Rengso also had new experience narratives. Two women who were gathering in the forest got disoriented. They heard a man walking by and called out for help. He appeared and offered to guide them homeward. Following him, they found themselves on top of a boulder at the forest’s edge. The man had vanished. One climbed a tree and found the path back home. However, on return, both were found to have deep bruise marks on their backs that they could not account for. At the wedding gathering where everyone was hearing this account, they affirmed, this was an encounter with people from *Rongbin*.⁴⁴

“Once recounted, supernatural experiences start to become subject to cultural processes.” (Bennett 1999, 5) Rengso had shared this narrative not as a story but as a report that was preceded by a disclaimer, “I have an amazing story to share with you. I heard it in a wedding and I immediately thought of you and how it can help you.” Mullen posits that “reality and plausibility must be present for a story to be accepted.” (Mullen 1972, 99) For Rengso, neither the reality nor the plausibility of the event required any argument. The event’s reality preceded any telling. This narrative was told in the genre of a testimony. As Koski argues that the “narrative registers” of a legend establishes the relationship between the text and the reality. (Koski 2016, 113) This story was also not told out of mere interest, but as evidence.

⁴⁴ Rengso (Interlocutor) telephonic conversation with the author, Tartu, November 2025

4.3.3. Part 12: A Revelation

Rengso then disclosed an unexpected information: *Rongbin* can be created ritually. A trained person: a *Rongbin* priest, could create the conditions of invisibility. This overturned a year of readings and analysis on invisible realities. *Rongbin* was being seen as a landscape feature, a phenomenology that was enacted through oral traditions (Tilley 1994), and was accessible through a “multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing, and practice.” (Pink 2015, xi) The emphasis was primarily on the encounter. However, according to the new information, *Rongbin* was not just found, but also, made.

According to Viveiros de Castro (1998), in perspectivist ontologies, ‘the perspective creates the subject.’ To ritually create *Rongbin* moves beyond the need for prior discovery and exceeds Basso’s claim that building place-worlds revises the past. (Basso 1996, 6) Not only did *Rongbin* presuppose a historical existence, but can be made accessible through ritual enactment. Thus, a second more intentional fieldwork became inevitable.

4.4. The Second Ethnography: Villages That We Create

Dharamsing Teron advised me on the translation and naming of *Rongbin* saying that “Only *Rong* will be inappropriate and misleading. So, using *Rongbin* will relate culturally. And I think anyone can write multiple essays on the same subject with new perspectives.” (Teron, Personal Correspondence, 2026)

The second fieldwork revealed cultural continuities, distinct etiologies, and ritual texts. I was no more just the outside observer, I was evolving, not just in my work, but also in the eyes of my interlocutors. The most important shift was methodological, although it emerged gradually. The very rituals and dreams that were mentioned in the passing during the first fieldwork as incidental atmosphere or performative preconditions, became primary epistemic mediums of the whole *Rongbin Complex* that was emergent by now. This realization began with our first part of the fieldwork among the Khasis.

4.4.1. Part 13: From *Rāmia* to *Kārjong*

Before moving onto the second fieldwork, it is valuable to discuss a parallel case that was attended, quite intentionally. This context becomes important for the second fieldwork in Karbi Anglong. Among the Khasis of the West Khasi Hills, certain members can, in their sleep, traverse the world in animal forms, not as metaphors but as an account of what literally happened when a person occupied the liminal position of a were-animal in the

realm of other-than-humans. As Lyngdoh (2023) notes, their body remained in this world, while something else moved in the parallel realm. For the Khasis, it was their *Rngiew*⁴⁵.

Dr Lyngdoh translates a weretiger interlocutor's account who spoke of another weretiger who would roam around in his animal form. He would know things that were going to happen. He was like a prophet, but he only knew things because he would travel in the *Rāmja*. *Rāmja*, the Khasi counterpart of which is *Ramia*, is dream. This is exactly where the *Sāngkhini* (Khasi weresnakes) go. But *Rāmja* here is also a parallel landscape. It's a parallel world.⁴⁶ However, the access to *Rāmia/Rāmja* is selective. One must purify themselves before they can go to *Rāmja*, which only happens if invited. And if you are someone who travels in *Rāmja*, you cannot eat certain taboo foods, cannot cheat others, cannot hurt other people, cannot be unkind or dishonest, etc. There is also a difference between a dream and *Rāmja*. So, if a person has been chosen to become a weretiger, he will receive the command from the *Rngiew* of the clan in the *Rāmja*.⁴⁷ The landscape of *Rāmja*, as we were told, is “the same reality, but also not the same reality,” what American scholar Claire Scheid calls “congruent geographies.”⁴⁸

These exclusive and contextualized concepts are not to be conflated with *Rongbin*. But they provide additional support and continuities on conditions of hiddenness and performance of invisibility among Northeast Indian Indigenous communities. Common narrative tropes of purification and the traversals in sleep-state establish important cross-cultural patterns without necessarily assimilating one tradition into another. The shared epistemic structure became unmistakable when Dr Ronghangpi shared, “Sometimes, people say, you cannot visit *Rongbin* directly. You will first start dreaming of it. Or rather, it is more appropriate to say, *Rongbin* will come to you in your dreams.”⁴⁹ If *Rongbin* can be accessed in an altered state of perception, and if dreams are one of the many sensorial modalities of out-of-ordinary encounters, dreaming can then be considered an epistemic precondition of encountering *Rongbin*, rather than a peripheral feature. Honko's thick corpus requirement becomes inevitable. The *Rongbin Complex* is not distributed as texts

⁴⁵ According to scholar Margaret Lyngdoh, *Rngiew* is the third aspect of the Khasi personhood. Other members of the community usually translate the concept as ‘essence of a person.’

⁴⁶ Lyngdoh (Translator) in discussion with the author, East Khasi Hills, January 2026

⁴⁷ Lyngdoh (Translator) in discussion with the author, East Khasi Hills, January 2026

⁴⁸ “Congruent geographies share the same geographical space yet remaining somewhat separated, two ‘layers’ that occupy the same area.” (Scheid 2015, 4)

⁴⁹ Rengso (Interlocutor) telephonic conversation with the author, Tartu, November 2025

trans-media⁵⁰ but stratified by mode of access, some that demanded additional fieldwork, some a specific social status, and some, to dream.

Early days of the second Karbi fieldwork involved conversations with Dharamsing Teron and *Kurusar* Dhonison Lekthe, on the Karbi soul taxonomy, *Phàrlō* (dream soul), *Chàmburuksō* (mischievous soul), *Harchi* (shadow soul), *Tirim* (kin soul), and *Kārjòng*: healing rituals through renaming, *Menchi Menvang* (lit.) ‘name coming,’ (See also: Ronghangpi 2025, 243) the impact of Christian and Hindu incursions on Indigenous religious frameworks, and cultural continuities with the Khasis. These conversations were not focused on *Rongbin*, but established the Karbi perspective of their world making everything that followed, legible. Extending Honko’s concept of the thick corpus in-context, “The Karbi oral traditions myths, ritual chants, songs, and mortuary narratives are [also] characterized by rich variation across different performers, clans, and regions.” (Ronghangpi 2025, 152) These discussions therefore informed the social structure as to who, when, where, and how the Karbis employ a generic category. These conversations thus, were not disjoint to *Rongbin*. (Frog 2016, 77)

4.4.2. Part 14: The *Chojun*

“*Chojun* is fundamentally a ritual of ancestor veneration, where a host pays homage to the spirits of their third-generation ancestors. This act of propitiation is crucial aspect of Karbi spiritual practice, demonstrating respect and maintaining a connection with the lineage... a cornerstone of the *Hem Angtar*, the spiritual heart of a Karbi household, *Chojun* is a profoundly intricate ritual that transcends a simple ‘eat-drink’ (*Cho-jun*) gathering. It serves as a comprehensive propitiation, honoring a pantheon of deities, including *Arnamkethe* (the Great Spirit), *Barithe* (the Sky Spirit), *Sar* (Ancestral Spirits), and a multitude of other spiritual entities.” (Dhanaraju & Teron 2025, 253)

This particular *Chojun* that we were invited to, drew almost a thousand people and went on for a full day. The ritual was elaborate. Before Mahesh, our primary interlocutor and host at this event along with Jirmi, our translator for this trip shared their knowledge on *Rongbin*, we had a brief introduction to *Chojun* and the processes that they were going to perform that day. Among several other details, we were also told aspect like the “offerings were made so that the sun does not dry the crops.” “That the chosen pigs for sacrifice for a particular deity would be steamed in banana leaf – ‘*Lo pen*

⁵⁰ See Jenkins 2007 on “Transmedia Storytelling”

ingthupo.” That “*Birni* who also had an altar at the site was like the younger sibling of *Arnām Kéthé* or *Vòphong* who was the territorial deity of that place must also be venerated like *Vòphong*. With pigs and *képānong* (tributes). We will also have to use the *Phòngrong* tree. However, while for *Arnām Kéthé* we take three of them, for *Birni* we only take one.” That, “*Sār*, is responsible to ensure and verify the sufficiency (measurement) of the yield of everything. Of the prosperity and abundance. As the advisor, he will look after them and give them what they need,”⁵¹ And so on. The amount of knowledge that was shared within the twenty-five-minute discussion needs its own dedicated space for delineation beyond a short summary as given above. It is not pursued here as it does not offer any significant contribution in-context yet.

4.4.2.1. Part 14a: Another Origin Narrative and More Experiences

Mahesh responds to our question on *Rongbin*, in English,

So, I have heard of this from my grandfather. He told me that the story began from the ancient times of *Thong Nokbe*. He was a Karbi warrior. The story is that, *Thong Nokbe* was a warrior working under *Chomang* king, the Jaintia king. The relative of the Jaintia king, had a secret.”

ML: “So, relative of the Jaintia king had a secret?”

Mahesh: “Yeah. So, they had a cloth. And only they knew about it. The cloth was a mystery. It could make you invisible. Like, I can wear that cloth and I will be invisible. After a deal with the relative of the Jaintia king, they showed him [*Thong Nokbe*] the *Rongbin* cloth. *Thong Nokbe*, took the cloth from her and said that ‘I want to look at it properly. It is too dark here.’ Slowly, moving further and further away, and he managed to take the cloth away.

ML (Margaret Lyngdoh): Such a naughty man!

Mahesh: No. It’s not naughty. It was for saving his people.

ML: How?

Mahesh: Because having that cloth could save them from intruders.

ML: From the Jaintia clan or Jaintia king you mean?

Mahesh: Yeah. From the intruders who came to attack. Because we Karbi people, we do not have the courage to defend against attacks. For that causes, they took away the cloth, they stole from her. And they gave it to the head village. And they wove all their clothes with that and wore them to be invisible. And that village, they also had some rituals, some chants. So, the whole village, made a boundary with that cloth, and it automatically became invisible. That is the *Rongbin*. This mystery continues to exist. Because you cannot see it with your naked eyes. Either it is there in the village, or in the jungle. You cannot see it. It is still invisible.⁵² Some chants still exist today. If some village, for example, some terrorists or militants make it too difficult to survive a place. Then, that chant can put a spell, around the whole village. It makes a boundary. Even if the militant comes, or the army, whatever may come. They will not find that place. They will only see a jungle in front of them. It is protective. For that causes, that *Thong Nokbé* stole from her. [It was also possible because] There are lots of similarities with the *Chomāng* peoples, like the Khasis. Lots of similarities are there. Languages and all. For that causes, they took away the cloth to save their own people. Those who want to see this village, they have to be pure-hearted person. Nowadays, people are lying, doing lots of sins and all, so we will not see the village, because the gods are protecting that village. Before, in ancient times, like 19th century, if we used to have some function or a traditional event somewhere, and we would not have clothes, we could go to the place and

⁵¹ Jirmi (Translator) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

⁵² Mahesh (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

pray to them, by offering them some betel nuts and leaves. Then next day, if you visit the same place, you will get the clothes.”

Abhirup: “Oh! they give the clothes.”

Mahesh: “Yeah. But the thing is that, we need to return the clothes. We could only borrow until the end of the event, but we must return. After washing the cloth properly. We need to return. During the ancient times, we received lots of the clothes, but thereafter people became naughty. They would change the cloth, or dirty them while making tea. For that causes, problems began and we stopped getting the clothes.”⁵³

The hiding here, is a fundamental act of an exclusive social relation that is issued through a historical event associated with a Karbi legend. This etiology follows Basso’s analysis of landscapes being encoded with moral and historical memory, carrying the stories that happened on them as a part of the place rather than an individual-only account. However, while the locations here are charged with meaning, they are not precisely marked in this case. Concealment, continuing from the first fieldwork, stays a social strategy, not a lack. *Rongbin* sustains present connections while making them ontologically unavailable to hostile presences.

Mahesh: Three hunters went on a hunt; one got separated deep in the jungle while pursuing a boar that he lost. Exhausted, he sat under a tree to rest when suddenly a woman appeared. They also don’t know, where she came from. They asked her, why she was there. So deep in the jungle. The lady said that this is her village. He still could not see the village with his naked eyes. So, she recited some chants and after that they could see the village. After that, they brought them [the lost man] to the village chief. The chief told him the truth, that this is *Rongbin*. And then, you came here, we will have a function. They were offered food, shelter, and everything. The next day, they mentioned that they need to go home. The village chief said, okay, you can go. But I will send two people along with you. But while going back, do not look back. They got curious. Why did they ask not to look back? They were also confused. They then started walking with the two people from the village. They had walked quite far, when curiosity got better of them. And then, they suddenly they look behind. And the two persons who were going along with him, automatically disappeared. At that moment. They got scared, and they ran. Soon after they joined their friends. Still, that story exists. But we can’t even find the main location of the *Rongbin*. Whether the *Singhason* side or the West side, we cannot even say that. Still, we Karbis believe that if lots of problem come to Karbi people, then *Rongbin* people will come to protect us. But we do not know that exactly the truth is. But we believe in that.⁵⁴

The ‘not looking back’ prohibition requires more than mere motif-cataloguing. Holbraad and Pedersen’s stance that Indigenous concepts be taken on their own terms rather than as ‘imperfect or metaphorical approximations of external categories’ (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 64) presents an imperative to engage with this as a cultural-specific claim towards the ontological consequences of directed attention. Seeing begets constitution and some constitutions are irreversible. Two analytical points emerge through this conversation. First, that *Rongbin* is not just a protective space but a reserve of Karbi magical power whose inhabitants come out in moments of crises to protect the Karbis

⁵³ Mahesh (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

⁵⁴ Mahesh (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

outside of *Rongbin*. Second, access to *Rongbin* is mediated through ontological conditions, not just social positioning. The right kind of person to encounter *Rongbin* is not a role one can occupy temporarily. He then continued to talk about the Karbi deities, about the duality of *Hī-r̄*⁵⁵, on the ambivalence of Karbi deities. He also briefly spoke about *Chomàngkàn*⁵⁶. The discussion also responded to a question I had in mind, regarding the association of dreams with *Rongbin*. I was told, “We won’t even know if we are in *Rongbin* or if someone is from there. So, how can we dream about it? All we hear are stories.”⁵⁷ Bennett argues that belief stories are narratives whose defining characteristic is the attachment of narrated experiences to living belief, not to a fixed textual form. (Bennett 1989, 291) These narratives had the same quality, not performed but offered.

4.4.2.2. Part 14b: Connecting the Dots

During the *Chojun* discussions, it was revealed that the two women whose encounter Rengso had described telephonically last year were from Rongpi’s village. She confirmed that she knew about the case and the women. She also proposed to organize a meeting with them at our next visit. Mullen posits that legends do not circulate through abstract mediums but through social networks of specific people who know each other, and whose narrator-narrative relationality is framed by geographical, social, and familial proximity, by “adding narrative details to the core rumor”. (Mullen 1972, 97) Rongpi’s proximity to *Rongbin* was literal. Without her testimony and offer, the account would have stayed a telephonic story from a friend-of-a-friend. Dégh argues that the legend-teller is always a social agent whose narrative positioning is inseparable from their position in the social world. (Dégh 2001, 140) Rongpi therefore, was not just a linguistic intermediary. With her story, *Rongbin* found another coordinate. Howard (2008) describes how vernacular authority distributes itself via a participatory network of connected individuals, each of whom is accountable for their part of the shared discourse. *Rongbin*, as diverse and emergent as it was turning out to be, with each interlocutor account, operated, not from a single narrative center but was maintained through a web of the community members

⁵⁵ Malicious entity or human with malicious intention (Ronghangpi 2025, 186)

⁵⁶ “*Chomàngkàn* is the secondary funerary ritual for the soul, guiding it towards *chomārong* (village of the ancestors).” (Ronghangpi 2025, 243)

⁵⁷ Jirmi (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

whose testimonies were intelligible because of their relationships with the traditional knowledge of *Rongbin*.

4.4.3. Part 15: In Conversation with Dhoniram

4.4.3.1. Part 15a: On *Rongbin*

The revisit to *Kurusar* Dhoniram was different than before. He repeated his stories from our previous visit, establishing narrative continuity. Then he added a new claim: by the time we visit next, he would have completed learning how to access *Rongbin* and could perhaps even take us with him. He said it as someone would say that they would finish a task by the end of the day. The cadence was everything. No suspense, no drama in the prospect, because from his end, there was none needed. He then layered this piece of information, and its urgency with a recent event from his brother's construction site where a worker, while looking at his phone could hear people standing and speaking behind him for almost an hour, however, when he turned around, no one was there. While that was unnerving enough, the sound of water being fetched and utensils being washed at about two in the morning, with no one sight, drove him away from that place in fear.⁵⁸

He shared all of this in a cadence that Bennett describes to be the characteristic of accounts that the teller has integrated completely into their self-understanding, that is stated as a personal fact without doubtful hedging or wondrous elaborations. (Bennett 1999, 17) These were not merely stories that he was telling us this time, these were facts and incidents from his life. He then resolved something that had been ambiguous across multiple conversations: the silence of *Rongbin* was not muteness, rather, managed acoustic reduction.

It is not like there is no *Sé* (voice) there, in *Rongbin*. There are different rules. Maybe they are just whispering to avoid being heard. How will they survive if they don't eat? So, husking of the grain is important. So maybe, they sit and they unsheathe one grain at a time with their hand. That takes away the sound of husking. That is how they survive perhaps... Just like a hunter needs to be quiet while hunting... As I told you last time, I have spoken to the territorial deity, and I have noted about ten to fifteen words that are spoken by them, with respect. I cannot share them with you because I have been asked not to share them with anyone.⁵⁹

It was not a village without sound. *Rongbin* sounds were non-non-existent, but were selectively withheld from the visible realm.

⁵⁸ Dhoniram (Interlocutor) in discussion with & translated by the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

⁵⁹ Dhoniram (Interlocutor) in discussion with & translated by the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

Pink (2009) posits that, places are constituted through sensory practices that go beyond mere visual observation. *Rongbin* as it became evident in this narrative was a place constituted by the management of aural sensory reach, not just by removal from the visual field. It is not supernatural in the sense of transcending a presumed nature-culture boundary, but is produced through specialized knowledge that governs perception. The genre thus shifts from the supernatural to disciplined performance. For the Karbis, it is *Mekbin*, to create a visual deception.

4.4.3.2. Part 15b: The Possession

Multiple deities possess Mili, Rasong's relative, not just *Longsāng Mukrāng*. The specific name of the territorial deity of the hill we visited in 2025 was told to be *Bāmonkiripo Tungjāng*, of the Timung clan. It was revealed to Rasong on performing *Sé Karkli* for the particular hill, after a possession event. Dr Ronghangpi later clarified, there are some who associate *Bāmonkiripo* with *Binong Vopo*, whose connection with *Rongbin* would soon be established by another interlocutor. On seeking knowledge from his relative, Rasong said,

When I used to face physical ailments. I realized that different people have done different things to me. I used to write those situations down. Because I could not remember everything. So, I wrote these situations down and asked them [the deities] for a solution. So, for instance he [one of the deities] taught me to use an egg to perform a ritual in order to send back any ominous magic that is sent to harm me. Similarly, *Longsāng Mukrāng* also taught me many things. Many different deities have shared deep insights. I had approached them to teach me everything. They visit my relative's body and through them I learn all of this. Even you can ask everything you want to know from them when they mediate. They will tell you everything, about your past, present, and future. But I will have to ask which deity is possessing them and responding to you.⁶⁰

Earlier, the existence of *Rongbin* priests and *Amén* (ritual name) and the ritual *Rongbin Asé*, to create or demarcate a land as *Rongbin*, were confirmed by various interlocutors. But there was little clarity on the difference between the pre-existing village and a created landscape. For instance, for *Kurusar* Dhoniram, the rituals were to access *Rongbin*, not to create one. The call with Rasong's relative, to interview them, was strained. The reluctance in their voice to allow us to witness their possession was palpable. It was a valid concern. While we respected their ability to mediate deities and perceived it as a valuable skill, not a lot of people would perceive it the same way; communication was necessary that could make them understand that we do not come with the intentions of harming their agency. They demanded to speak with us. Dr Lyngdoh and Dr Ronghangpi

⁶⁰ Rasong (Interlocutor) in discussion with & translated by the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

could eventually convince them. They were participant in a context that they did not choose, nor would they have chosen, if the conditions of trust would not have emerged.

The first signs of a higher spiritual power, had arrived when Mili was still in school, without any warning. Soon, these episodes acquired a more stable structure as possessions that consolidated deities from both, the Hindu religion and the Indigenous practices. They also mentioned that they are neither fluent nor do they know the languages that would arrive during such instances. Each episode was different. The chants themselves came in registers that they did not recognize outside the trance state. Their clientele, to seek mediation from the deities, would include people seeking fertility, financial guidance, outcomes of political endeavors, etc.

The possession sequence concluded at what appeared to be a Hindu temple, with deity idols and an altar with *Sivalingā*⁶¹ with trident on the side. According to Pink (2009), the temple was a site where the boundaries between regular and habitual life and the ritual attention was managed architecturally. I was asked to stop recording. The preparations were made. An earthen lamp and incense were lit. The Karbi local liquor was kept on the side along with a *Poho*⁶². The possession started with *ōm namah sivay* in ritual cadence and within minutes, the possessing deity identified themselves to be *Longsāng Mukrāng*. Questions on *Rongbin*, of accessing it, our intentions, and future prospects were answered through a voice that was not of our interlocutor anymore. I would refrain from mentioning details on request from our interlocutor at this stage. In summary, we were told that we were trusted, and given blessings to continue. During our discussions, post-ritual, they disclosed, they “did not really believe in *Rongbin*.” In the same register they noted that they did not really believe in God or rituals either.

Howard (2008) analyzes how vernacular authority functions as a form of distinctiveness that generates social positioning wherein the claims to unusual knowledge produce credibility, and credibility produces influence. Further, Goldstein and Shuman (2016) also argue that the stigmatized vernacular knowledge is not merely marginalized but strategically deployed. The stigma operates as the evidence of authenticity as well as a mode of authentication that functions as the social currency. Our interlocutors understood and were thorough with this circuit of knowledge production and narrative authority. *Rongbin*'s elusive nature, being a phenomenon that is largely inexplicable, the

⁶¹ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingam> [for introductory reference only]

⁶² *Poho* is a Karbi scarf that is placed on the shoulders as a greeting and sign of respect.

association with magic, belief, and authority that comes directly from the deities that possess Rasong's relative, form a complex that makes the narrative valuable. Mili's denial adds to the complex in two possible ways. First, through Van Leeuwen's distinction between factual belief and religious credence, where the former is governed by evidential norms while the latter is "setting and authority dependent" that does not require the narrator to treat their propositions as factual claims. (Van Leeuwen 2014, 699) This person was structurally embedded in a religious practice, embodied deities, and had a life organized around the enactment, and yet, did not hold the ontological claims as a part of *their* belief. Second, through a synthesis of Dundes' "projective inverse" (Dundes 1976, 1522) and Shuman's point on the power of embedded counter-narratives to strengthen believability. (Shuman 2023, Personal Correspondence at ISFNR lecture) Non-belief in the supernatural, especially by someone who we just witnessed in a state of possession would perhaps inversely validate the possessions' credibility, by detaching the personal and shifting the phenomenon from being fantastical to incidental, ergo, not under their control. Both analyses are informed by the case rather than be undermined by it. Primiano's insistence that lived experience of ambivalence and doubt is integral to vernacular religion (Primiano 1995, 44) and that individual negotiations of traditions reveal texture of lived belief builds towards what Tafjord (2016) highlights to be Indigenous religious phenomena as a site of political and epistemological struggle. What might be considered as a distinct Indigenous religious category, and what can be considered a variant of something that is already known, determines whether that category can maintain its conceptual grounding or be absorbed into a pre-existing taxonomy. This was vernacular Indigenous religion in practice.

4.4.3.3. Part 15c: An Etiological Detour

A short detour before the possession event to *Kurusar* Lokheswar had yielded a third origin narrative.

Thousands of years ago, when Karbis were very few. The Ahoms used to attack them. Such wars happened thrice. They were called [with], *Man Aron or Shyiems (1700s)*, *Chomang Aron (Khasis)*. In order to protect themselves, they [Karbhis] would run deep into the forest. And it was in these forests, that the deity resided. Known as *Rongbin*. *Rongbin Arnam*. And thus, they venerated *Rongbin*. And once they prayed to him, after demarcating a boundary with a thread, the bounded area became invisible. Even if conflict arrives there, it [the attackers] won't be able to see them. Hence the name, *Rong* meaning village, while *Bin* means invisible. There are many *Rongbin* priests, but you will have to go far. I will have to ask around if you want to meet them. However, you cannot discern between a regular person or a *Rongbin* person. And the *Rongbin* priests also do not like to show themselves to others because their primary intention is only to protect. So, it

is considered to be sacred and to be kept secret. You can tell each other the narratives, but just not who exactly is a *Rongbin Kurusar*. Because if everyone gets to know about it, then it will get contaminated and the whole purpose will be lost.

We were told of a new ritual *Sākphān Rongbin*, that was elaborated not by Lokheswar but by our next interlocutor. By this point in the fieldwork, Bennett's argument that, legends "describe natural occurrences that have no discernible natural causation. So, a cause is sought in unhappy or violent past events," (Bennett 1999, 44) was becoming more stable in the origin narratives. However, a new critical information, that *Rongbin* could possibly also be a deity, emerged here. This would find another claimant soon.

4.4.4. Part 16: The Tiger Priest⁶³

Kurusar Riso met us in the mode of a qualified ritual auditor, helping us review our earlier encounters while also offering new knowledge. He continued discussing about the Karbi religious landscape from our earlier conversations, from his perspective. He says,

The Hindu influence is so much that sometimes, those who follow the Karbi traditional religion, think that their deity is Hindu. And this is happening because the Hindu groups take advantage of the fact that the youngsters nowadays only visit rituals and gatherings to eat, drink, and enjoy with no discussion about the Indigenous traditions or the practices... [But] We are not Hindu. We are under the sixth schedule. Why are we under the sixth schedule? Because we are completely different from Hindu. We have a completely different system of life. So, we are trying to proliferate this understanding. But these factions are infiltrating so fast. So, for example, we have the household deity, we call *Pèng*. So, what these Hindu factions say is that *Pèng* is *Sivā*. And then, these Hindu factions that are present around Diphu, they consider the territorial deity *Inglongkiri* as *Sivā*. Sometimes they call him *Longsāng Mukrāng* also.⁶⁴

This account highlights how contesting religious authorities negotiate within the Karbi religious landscape as mentioned earlier in the thesis. *Kurusar* Riso's argument was not directed at anyone in particular, but at the complexities that Karbi Indigenous religiosities must navigate in contemporary times to survive, especially in the face of a politically precarious time where Indigenous practices are under constant pressure to be Hinduized. It was also in continuation of our earlier conversations on interpreting Karbi religious practices and its nuances. His deconstruction of conflating Indigenous deities as *Sivā* was presented neither to discredit a particular individual nor to discredit another vernacularity, but as an epistemic concern towards the general status of Indigenous religious practices.

Dalziel (2016) highlights that the category of rumor is not neutral but evaluative. It carries social and religious implications in its assignment. The instances that *Kurusar*

⁶³ A Karbi tiger priest is a ritual performer who specializes in negotiating with tigers in order to safeguard their villages from their attacks. (Riso, Interlocutor, February 2026)

⁶⁴ Riso (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

Riso used to establish his concerns of religious conflations in Karbi Anglong was implicative and consequential towards the Karbi social and religious tapestry. His authority and clarifications enact Honko's thick corpus through his internalized and thorough knowledge of the tradition that enables him to distinguish, between what actually belongs and what resembles a belonging. Tafjord (2016) argues that Indigenous religious phenomena constitute a site of political and epistemological struggle. In this case, the statement is not merely a theoretical abstraction but gets embodied as an extended fieldwork condition owed to the embedded on-ground situation. Dégh also argues that the legend as a genre is inherently organized around contested claims of the truth that are not disruptive but part of its normal operations. (Dégh 2001, 56) Also important to note here is Frog's argument on generic conditions and functions towards the seriousness of an account as opposed to a touristic performance, (Frog 2016, 68) that emerge through contesting narratives. Here, the critical function towards *Rongbin* was itself taking shape as a traditional practice surrounding the phenomenon. The inclusion of this discussion thus is a methodological call, not a rhetorical one.

In a subsequent conversation on *Rongbin*, *Kurusar* Dhonison (also a tiger-priest) shared a circumspect narrative, "Let me tell you. *Rongbin* is completely different. *Rongbin* is not a place that you have a key to, and you unlock and you go there. There is no such system. But you can meet people from there. But we do believe that it does exist. If you go to *Singhason* side..." and then he chose to complicate something that already was confusing enough, "you will observe by some sound. In the month of December, the nearby people always heard the drums. Sounds of the drums. They usually hear such sounds." I ask, "So, it is not a village without sound?" "It is a village without sound, but you won't see them or locate the village, but you will hear those actions." The paradox, shuffles between clarity and confusion to date, in need of continued fieldwork. He also dismissed the 'cat-eyes' claim as popularized folklore. In his account as well, *Rongbin* managed its sensorial signature exactly as it was mentioned in every other account, with precision and exclusivity of access.

Sākphān Rongbin was discussed next, the structure of which mirrors *Rongbin*'s architecture but operates at a household scale. A perimeter of managed invisibility within which, a practitioner of malicious magic loses their spiritual sight and is pushed into an illusion, protecting those inside the boundary. *Rongbin*, in principle therefore, is portable. It is negotiable from a cosmological to domestic scale, while retaining its essence – who can see what, under what conditions. He also defined *Rongbin Asé*, a ritual for

demarcating a larger boundary for instance, Diphu, a distinction from *Sākphān Rongbin*, but functioning on the same architectural principle.

However, he added a piece of new information this time, on other-than-humans from *Rongbin*.

Some of the elders told me that those wild boars and deer, those are actually domesticated by *Rongbin* people. So, when you go to hunt and by chance you get a deer or a wild boar then you have to cut a small piece of the right ear or the leg. We call it *Akunji / Akunchi Ke'en*. So, this *Akunchi Ke'en* is respect given to *Rongbin*. Suppose, I kill a wild boar, and if I do not cut that right side, it means that they will see and they can heal the wound and they can take the animal back. So, the thing is that, we pay respect. Deer and the wild boar are actually owned by, so we call it *Sòng Bāng*. *Sòng Bāng* is the one who domesticate the animals. So, we have to respect this.⁶⁵

These animals, were *Rongbin's* livestock, ranging the forest just like other livestock graze on farmlands. The *Akunchi Ke'en* is a formal acknowledgement of transfer between the two parties of different visibility but equivalent ontological standing, a logic that can be structurally mapped to Viveiros de Castro's argument of the human-animal relationship through protocols that acknowledge the complete personhood of the animals, and the obligations that emerge thereby. He also shared that he can perform *Sākphān Rongbin* and clarified the difference between *Rongbin* the village, and *Rongbin* the ritual.

Apart from that we have *Rongbin Asé*. *Rongbin Asé* is not that kind of *Rongbin* that is a village and people live there. That *Rongbin* ritual is, say here we have a room, the one that you can see from outside. Spiritually I do [the ritual], so that we are roaming here and there but no one can see from the outside. This is the ritual. And I do this thing. *Sākphān Rongbin* priests are very rare.⁶⁶

Upon asking to share some experience narratives, Dhonison described about a group of people who would perform an elaborate ritual for the deity *Inglongpo*, at *Singhason*. He described how when they would count the *langpong* (cups made of bamboo) distributed during the feast to drink from, they would run short of one every time. "They said that we felt, definitely there was a *Rongbin* person who was walking together with them. I can even take you to that person."⁶⁷ Two additional narratives were shared; of a boy who disappeared into *Rongbin* upon falling in love with a girl he encountered in the forest, near the river; and about a hunter who failed to perform *Akunji*, watched from atop a tree as a figure appeared from nowhere, touched the dead boar (that the hunter had killed) lightly, the animal came back to life and ran away. Both narratives conform to what Frog writes on belief legends organized around communication and negotiation of claims about the nature of the world. (Frog 2016, 56) These were offered in response to specific

⁶⁵ Dhonison (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

⁶⁶ Dhonison (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

⁶⁷ Dhonison (Interlocutor) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

questions, posed in a specific setting, presented from a person whose narrative authority was embedded in the social structure that encompassed the exchange. All the terms and conditions that were part of the knowledge, were not simply logistical. They formed the epistemic foundation of the tradition of *Rongbin* in discussion. The ritual was not outside of the practice that produced it and the practice was historically contingent. Access to such knowledge is usually never simple.

Kurusar Riso was directed more at discussing religious identities, confluences, and his insights. He concluded the discussion by sharing his concerns over a recently published article by a Hindu-aligned Karbi person that assimilated the Karbi Indigenous deities as localized manifestations of pan-Hindu divine entities, especially the gods, classifying the Indigenous worldview almost obsolete. Tafjord (2016) highlights this as one of the primary ways through which Indigenous religions are absorbed, assimilated, and neutralized by the institutions, rendering them only as a variant of something ‘larger’. This move removes the Indigenous capacity to challenge the analytical frameworks that are being imposed on them. An uninformed treatment of *Rongbin* might also render it to the realm of overlapping beliefs, stripping it of its Indigenous identity. It would be a fallacy to reduce *Rongbin* as merely an archaeological and evolutionary concept and not take into consideration the complete picture as a geographically and historically contingent relational concept, as a discourse, and as a material expression of the Karbi lived Indigenous religion.

4.4.5. Part 17: The *Rongbin* Complex

The final and one of the most significant contributions came from *Kurusar* Sarklim, who shared an etiology of *Rongbin* unlike anything that was encountered previously. And he delivered this in multiple iterations. In his different iterations; There used to be either twelve, six, five, or seven siblings; one of the siblings, considered to be useless by the others, who was constantly bullied – was mentioned sometimes to be *Rongbin* himself, and sometimes rescued by another being who was *Rongbin*. This reconnects to the narrative by Lokheswar, who during our conversations briefly mentioned of *Rongbin* being a divine entity. In some iterations the bullying was being perpetrated by all the sisters (except the eldest) onto their youngest brother; in others, on the maternal uncle by his niece – ultimately resulting into the formation of *Rongbin*. The account passed through several renditions, both, during fieldwork (with translator Serli) and post-fieldwork (with translator Rengso) discussions and translations. As the internal contradictions were too

frequent at this stage, the narrative variations could not be explored in full. Analyzing this particular narrative through a framework outside of what has already been offered by the community would be premature. However, two things can be inferred confidently from this particular narrative complex.

First, a plausible synthetic summary based on the several iterations: Once, there lived a group of siblings, who were orphaned. The eldest was a girl and the youngest was a boy. One of them was considered to be useless and thus, excluded from the social and familial reciprocities that a family should ideally provide in a Karbi household. The other, moved by this, chose to leave the household with the mistreated sibling to a location that could not be seen or accessed without special ritualized consent. Further, with the help of *Arnām-Arni*, the territorial and ancestral deities, the original village where they lived, called *Rong'arup* was made invisible. That is *Rongbin*.⁶⁸

In every iteration by Sarklim, *Rongbin* was a person. The place was mostly personified after the event. Dr Ronghangpi's analytical offering seems to be on-point, "It might make sense for *Rongbin* to be a person. How else would knowledge, that is so specific, survive, if the specific person does not exist to talk about it or carry it forward." (Ronghangpi 2026, Personal Correspondence) The protective feature of the village, conditions for accessibility, acoustic management, genealogical connections to ritual magic – as a consequence of *Rongbin*, a being with a history, family, experience of mistreatment, and a response to the mistreatment establishing relational and interactive modalities for everyone who came thereafter – becomes legible with this narrative. The metaphors of conflict and passage to safety was personalized in this etiology. Scheid's analysis of how prominent other-than-human beings among the Adis of the Eastern Himalayas lead community-based life parallel to the human ones, with families, dwellings, and genealogies, (Scheid 2015, 102) presents a structurally parallel case in another Indigenous community from Northeast India.

Second, the presence of both, organic variation and phenomenological variation in Karbi oral narratives can be underlined through this tale. This narrative exemplifies the presence of a mental text that is driven by mnemonic devices such as reduplication, among Karbi storytellers, that craft not only the core narrative but also its several variants that disallows the presence of a singular authoritative version. (See Chapter: *Discussion on Existing Literature*) This is in addition to the circularity present in the Karbi oral

⁶⁸ Compiled from translations by Serli and Rengso, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

traditions as a feature toward their sustained and easy transmissibility. Sarklim drew the parallels himself, with the well-known story of *Binong Vopo*. Being the youngest son of Longthu Dera and Jokri Teronpi of the Timung clan, Binong was orphaned along with his other siblings. He endured persistent mistreatment from his sisters and one day left his home. He eventually got married and invited his sisters for a feast, with two conditions as a sign of respect and reciprocity for the invitation. One, to bring *Hōr* (Karbi traditional alcohol) as an offering, and two, to not look back once they start to return. However, enraged by his sister's disrespect for not keeping even these requests, he curses all the Karbi clans to forever be bound to venerate the maternal uncle or suffer *Nihu Kāchiri* (maternal uncle's affliction). (Ronghangpi 2025, 213-219) The motifs and parallels, of mistreatment, abandonment, and conditional access (blessing) is noticeable. This highlights the interconnectedness of Karbi narratives, including that of the *Rongbin* complex, demonstrated from within the tradition itself. *Kurusar* Sarklim responded to a directed question, "The one residing in *Rongbin*, that person is Dera. And you must venerate the Dera deity to visit *Rongbin*," directly referring to the orphaned *Binong Vopo*, who is also a Dera.

About his own visit to *Rongbin*, he told, "He did visit *Rongbin*. He was told in his dream that he should visit *Rongbin*. And then he visited *Rongbin* during the night. And when he went there, he was able to talk with others there. However, they could not see each other's face. And afterwards, he fell asleep there for a day. So, he stayed there in *Rongbin* for a day." While he could not mention the names of those who live in *Rongbin*, he shared that he did meet a person from the Timung clan.⁶⁹ A bleak but emergent epistemic structure across the Khasi and Karbi belief worlds become seemingly legible here. Dreams mediate transgression of ontological boundaries in both the communities: for the Khasis, in were-animal transformation traditions, to inhabit an alternate reality, for the Karbis, a mechanism of the arrival into another dimension of existence. Through partially parallel mechanisms, although contextually distinct traditions. He reconfirmed most information we had received earlier, including the source of *Rongbin* probably being in Jaintia Hills and about other features mentioned by previous interlocutors. It also included the ritual corpus, except for the claims of *Rongbin* people being cat-eyed, or the territorial deity being the same as a *Sivā*. He added an additional crucial statement on the act of transmission. "*Rongbin* is there, after Hamren. The left side is for the Karbis while

⁶⁹ Rengso (Translator) in discussion with the author, Karbi Anglong, February 2026

the right is for *Rongbin*. And if one wants to visit, one must take a white male chicken to perform the traditional sacrificial ritual before entering. He is sharing all this knowledge with you because he trusts you. And he knows that you will not misuse it.” Dégh posits that the relationship between the teller and the listener in legendry is constitutive of the legend’s meaning. (Dégh 2001, 228) Trust, in my case, meant that the knowledge will not be distorted, was not relational comfort but an epistemic precondition.

Every interlocutor I asked, “Why did you choose to share these stories with me?” responded in some variation, the same thing. It was trust as the condition under which the knowledge could move correctly. Without the appropriate relationship, the knowledge would neither transfer, nor sustain. The knowledge in each case, only became accessible when appropriate relationality was established. This is not a methodological encasing but a claim about the epistemic structure of *Rongbin* itself. Upon reflection I recall, *Kurusar Sarklim* did not start his stories with *Rongbin* but of an account of ritual healing, to highlight his skills as a *Kurusar*. Latvala’s argument on genre categories that structure analytical visibility (Latvala 2016, 419) underscores *Rongbin*’s ever increasing aetiologies that never map cleanly to a single folkloristic category of either a legend, or a memorate, or a myth. They are cosmogonic, testimonial, aetiological, and didactic, all at the same time. Forcing a single authoritative classification would falsify the material. Further, Primiano argues that vernacular religion is religion as it is lived and experienced by individuals, always personally negotiated, never simply received. (Primiano 1995, 44) *Rongbin* accounts, were vernacular religion at full scale; richly individual, internally complex, structurally in tandem with broader invisible traditions, and constantly molded by pressures from several fronts. *Rongbin*’s distribution as an invisible ritual practice demands to be treated as its own category rather than a mere curiosity or a sub-category of magical and religious practices.

The fieldwork lasted for some more days. However, we could not afford to go beyond Diphu to meet other people. Just like in 2025, we gathered on the final day, to have a lunch before flying back to Tartu. The first Karbi interlocutor I met in 2025 Mirbin was also invited. On hearing about our fieldwork, she turned towards me and said, “I have so many stories about *Rongbin*. When you come next year, I will tell you. Not today...”

4.5. The Reflection

4.5.1. Overview

Rongbin, throughout all the narratives documented to date: origin narratives, legend tales, ritual texts, and so on, highlight the fundamental human need for protection. The Karbi call to the other-than-humans for safety, preservation, and healing in times of conflict; in exchange of ritual affiliation that is always negotiated. The origin narratives persistently locate *Rongbin* to have arisen from inter-community conflict; the experience narratives framed the encounters as acts of shelter and care; conditions of encountering the village were always that of the absence of malicious intent; and the ritual for its creation is a mechanism of protection. That, despite *Rongbin* being substantially consequential, yet remains unrealized in the study of Indigenous practices is exactly what makes this study analytically inevitable.

4.5.2. Post-Synthesis

Although I have tried to write the ethnography to be easily readable, the fieldwork was not. Neither physically nor intellectually. It moved from interviews to events to dead ends. Gathering trust, enough to talk about *Rongbin*, needed persistent, invested, and ethically challenging communication with my interlocutors. Initial discouragement came from many directions. It included skepticism around access restrictions of sacred and secret knowledge for a fresh researcher from outside the community. Ethical concerns about documenting practices that are deliberately concealed, and negotiating with the analytical parameters as no institutional ethics framework could substitute the community-specific epistemological preconditions. It also involved a tangential self-caution from cognate fields, that a study of invisible landscapes risked appearing too fantastical to be considered a serious academic text. And finally, the possibility of mortal danger. These concerns were not dismissed but upheld in productive tension as most were only directly addressed on the field and could not be preempted.

Building trust took time and was pivoted to assessments of reliability, reciprocity, and my ability to receive the knowledge at a pace set by the community. The shift between the two fieldworks was noteworthy in their quality. The length of conversations, shifts in gatekeeping, and topics that the interlocutors themselves offered were foregrounded. The permission to use the name *Rongbin* in academic text was requested explicitly of the scholars from the community and the interlocutors. It was a genuine epistemological threshold that was a precondition towards a contextual and respectful representation of

the phenomenon. My own religious positionality, relinquishment of my religious identity, and an intentional and honest engagement with the community's relational ontology became a site for direct negotiation as well.

Another sensorial event occurred post-fieldwork. Many weeks since the first *Rongbin* visit, I kept having recurring dreams of being on the hill again. It was more of a distorted memory of the walk in 2025 but in ways that never happened. When I shared this with my Dr Lyngdoh, I was cautioned. The caution was a methodological one. As a folklorist, I must learn how to maintain an analytical distance, clarify interpretive positionality, and avoid being drawn back into a phenomenological register that was not my present. This was helpful not to get too immersed in the material through what Alex Aisher called an “unhealthy ontological entanglement with the field.” (Aisher 2020, 14) The advice to keep one foot outside of the phenomenon was not to detach myself from the subject, but an active effort to maintain analytical clarity.

However, when the same experience was shared with my interlocutors, the response was in a completely different epistemic register. The caution here was ontological. My interlocutors told me that persistent dreaming of *Rongbin* implied it had taken a liking to my *Kārjong* (soul). This meant that a part of me never left the supposed *Rongbin* and if the dreams continue and should they inflict restlessness and anxiety, a ritual must be performed to bring the *Kārjong* back into the body. This was presented as a relational condition, not a psychological one. This is the asymmetry that Aisher underlines. Fieldwork immersion happens because the researcher is required to immerse into alternate lifeways “before we have any idea what we are [about to] learn.” (Aisher 2020, 4) For the Karbis, *Kārjong* is a transcendental feature of *Arléng*. What I experienced as cognitive residue was interpreted by the community as a relational fact that necessitated ritual correction. This correction perhaps was as much for my benefit as it was to redress the ontological imbalance that was introduced because of my presence. Treating the dream as merely a psychological phenomenon would invite what Aisher highlights as the “reductionist withdrawal” (Aisher 2020, 2) that dissolves the community interpretations into a decontextualized framework. A direct inversion of the ontological turn. The cost of such withdrawal as Aisher highlights is rendering the field “an inert stage upon which human actors strutted out their days.” (Aisher 2020, 15)

Apart from this particular instance, throughout the fieldwork, two casings functioned simultaneously. The supervisory guidance that sustained the analytical distance from the personal experiences. Second, the interlocutors' intervention that

disallowed the experience to be decontextualized. The material therefore, was a consequence of sharing my personal experience as much as it was a result of the formal ethnographic discussions. What a reductionist management of my position and distance as a researcher would have suppressed became an additional example of the Karbi ontological permeability. As we sat in one of the fieldworks where I was inspired to share my dream narrative, I realized that some amount of ontological exposure is not necessarily a failure of the methodological conditioning but a constitutive feature of it. Absolute objectivity is structurally impossible. The boundary between the emic analytical category and scholarly interpretation stays, however, it is not a thick and clean line. And if it were, the cost against the analysis would be too high.

4.6. The Ritual Implication(s)

For the current work, addressing one of the many features of the Karbi indigenous world, Kareng Ronghangpi's doctoral thesis forefronts an essential gap: the ritual frame. Her work demonstrates how rituals function as the primary medium through which the Karbi cosmological life is organized, human and other-than-human relationalities are crafted, and knowledge is transmitted. Although, three rituals, *Rongbin Asé/Amén*, *Sākphān Rongbin*, and *Rongbin Keplāng* were mentioned, they were not shared yet and therefore, this section only highlights a few features that Ronghangpi discussed, thereby establishing why it becomes a crucial source to further this work.

At the center of her analysis is the principle of *Sé*, the Karbi ritual aspect of 'voice.' (Lyngdoh 2025, Conference Presentation) *Sé* is not representational, rather, ontologically foundational in Karbi ritual practice. *Sé* is "intrinsically linked to the *Keplāng álūn*, the mythic origin narratives that recount the creation of all existence." (Ronghangpi 2025, 44) In context, to name a deity in the appropriate ritual register is to activate the relational-reciprocal bond that envelops the Karbi cosmos. The *Sé Karkli* (ritual chants) are forms of speech that operate within the same relational ontological plane rather than being symbolic. (Ronghangpi 2025, 230-232) And in current context, it is exactly the absence of 'sound,' perhaps its ritual non-performance that had produced *Rongbin*, the creation being a consequence of cosmological breach – transgressing relational regard.

The structure of Karbi ritual propitiation is organized around mutual obligational contract that is established through the *Pirthé Keplāng álūn*, the creation narrative where the current existence emerged through negotiations between *Pithè* and *Pothè* (the

primordial grandparents), *Mukráη Sarpō* and *Sarpī*, *Jakòη Kaṅtāη* and *Horāη Kantāη*, and the corpus of hundred deities. Karbi ritual propitiations exemplify the contractual renewals that preserve the “cultural resilience through flexible structures that allow for regional variation while preserving core cosmological principle.” (Ronghangpi 2025, 251) The narrative analogue of the Dongka Sarpo mountain spirit, who “frequently bestowed clothes and other attires as well as jewelry on the condition that they are returned once the function has been served. However, due to the carelessness of the people, the mountain ceased to respond to them,” (Ronghangpi 2025, 56) is formally homologous to one of the origin narratives of *Rongbin*. One where a breach in the contract established between a human and other-than-human, resulted into a retraction of other-than-human presence. Thus, the landscape becomes an emergent social field that involves expectations, has its own agency, and withdraws when the negotiations break.

Ronghangpi’s work establishes the most critical theoretical grounds or positioning for the *Rongbin* rituals that is essential to advance further research and preservation. This also establishes that *Rongbin* might really constitute a node within the larger *invisible ritual complex*. Ritual in Karbi context is not necessarily supplement to the mundane but an integral condition, a continued, intentional, and cosmologically grounded phenomenon through which the terms of human existence is mediated, in interactions with other-than-humans.

Conclusion(s)

A reader who might arrive at this page with more confusion than clarity, in a way, would have encountered the text correctly. *Rongbin* does not resolve. It is not supposed to, neither is it designed to. This ethnography is not an organization of the sequence of events in a linear order. There is no authoritative version, no primary origin narrative, no single ritual that constitute *Rongbin*. It also happens that no Karbi has a complete account either. The incompleteness documented here, as mentioned earlier, is not a research limitation. It is the knowledge complex itself, performing the very functions it is designed for, through selective discourse, relational access, and a structural refusal towards an externally imposed completion. A corpus of this kind, with internal contradictions, multiple etiologies, contested accounts, deliberate withholding of ritual narratives, is not necessarily an underdeveloped thick corpus. Rather, the thickness of this corpus is constituted by its internal epistemic conditions. To charge towards a resolution irrespective, would be, as Noyes posits, to “leapfrog from the local to transcendental meaning.” (Noyes 2008, 41) This text refuses to do so.

The ethnography that was conducted over two years establish multiple important claims. First, *Rongbin* is not a belief about a certain place. It is a category of space whose invisibility is constitutive rather than incidental. Every interlocutor treated invisibility of *Rongbin* as structural rather than a lack – where entities, beings, objects, landscapes, people, etc. are removed from immediate visual perception and only made conditionally accessible. Dhoniram, Riso, and all others, confirmed this directly. That the sound of *Rongbin* does not cross its perimeter. *Rongbin* does not only hide, it also withholds. And these are ontologically distinct functions. The visible landscape and *Rongbin* occupy the same physical space but in different genres of existence. That this claim might be more inclined towards metaphysics than ontological restrictions is exactly the point. The ontological difference between the two genres of existence is not merely a cultural variation in perceiving the Universal nature. (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 472-473) Every jungle is not a *Rongbin*. The analytical implication, following Holbraad and Pedersen is that the ethnographic material must be allowed to transform the existing analytical concepts rather than be subsumed by them. (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 6) To treat *Rongbin* as a metaphor would not be an analysis but its foreclosure.

Second, the term *Rongbin Complex* instead of *Rongbin Narrative Complex* underscores this clarity. The ‘narrative-complex’ category would have preempted the analysis to a textual-expressive lens. *Rongbin* is scattered across narratives, this is correct.

But it is also a distributed in rituals, *Rongbin Asé/Amén*, *Sākphān Rongbin*, and so on. It also involves landscape features, approach practices, dream encounters, *Kurusar* knowledge, hybrid religious narratives, etc. ‘Complex’ is barely an adequate term. However, compared to other English terms I came up with, this accommodates the possibility that the physical space exists independently and outside of the narratives. This possibility was strongly presented at each fieldwork interaction and cannot be evaded by this analysis.

Lastly, the research responds to the six research questions with a balanced approach. *Rongbin* establishes relational ontology of a space that is conditionally invisible. This responds both to the first and the second research questions. In response to the third question *Rongbin* presents itself without a single narrative custodian. It is distributed across contradicting *Kurusars*, interlocutors with several narrative fragments, dream receivers, possessions, and the landscape itself, that become functional parts of this writing, not mere background. *Rongbin*’s complete meaning is not possible to obtain from a single performance or person. The fourth question is responded to, through *Rongbin*’s generic ensemble. *Rongbin* is sustained through memorates, etiologies, rituals, cautionary rumor-legends, possession testimonies, and so on. The generic fluidity here is not a categorial problem but a cosmological feature of a community that does not separate ordinary from the non, human from the other, etc., nor does it produce a stable genre. Karbi emic genres as Ronghangpi analyzes, are essentially permeable. (Ronghangpi 2025, 153-54) Attempting to impose a stable narrative on an already stable generic network of stories would be in Dégh’s terms, forcing the legend to resolve the very contestations that animate it. (Dégh 1996, 33)

The question pertaining to origin narratives reveal organic variations that are organized around a core cosmological precondition, protection from violence, preservation of knowledge, and the structural invisibility as the way to make it possible. The several motifs that emerged from the empirical evidence itself, the ask to not look back, familial discord and so on, do not emerge from an elusive urform. Searching for one would not only be an epistemological fallacy but also reduce the living, internally variegated tradition into hypotheticals. What these variations appease is a functional imperative that Ronghangpi writes in the *Pirthē keplāng álūn*: "who will protect the Karbis, who will defend the Karbis" (Ronghangpi 2025, 111-112). *Rongbin* in each of its version is exactly a response to that. The final question that concerns itself with the disorientation, perceptual shift, and placelore is responded to, in parts three and four of

the ethnography. The circling of the hill for instance was the agency of the supernatural that “do not respond passively to human presence.” (Valk & Sävborg 2018, 10; Valk 2018, 110) Claire Scheid’s ‘congruent geographies,’ coexisting landscapes that are structurally overlapping but perceptually disparate also contributes to *Rongbin*’s place lore.

A methodological disclaimer is also important at the concluding stage. The writing approach has been narrator-centered, partially embedded with analysis, following Hufford’s insistence on experiential priority over explanatory reduction. This allows the ethnography to avoid a theoretical breakdown. The narrator’s voice here, is the primary epistemological unit and the analysis functions as the second layer on top of it to co-create the knowledge of *Rongbin*. The idea was not to bombard the reader either with only a narrative-descriptive account or a theoretical patchwork of a tradition that has been sparingly discussed in academic scholarship to date, but to acknowledge the oral complexity of the tradition in the written form, and produce a meaningful first text.

Through the case of Rongbin, “the invisible” becomes culturally legible through various expressive genres that embed, embody, enact, and extend lived Indigenous religion. The discourse of Rongbin is socially circulated especially through the legendary and belief narratives whose truth-statuses are negotiated both rhetorically as well as pragmatically. The legend and belief narratives are anchored through placelore that attaches memory and encounter to place-sites. The associated rituals assist in crafting stratified ontologies that establish other-than-human agencies and perspectival realities. (Italics mine, for emphasis)

Rongbin thus can only be approximated as a Karbi Indigenous category of space that exists in the same physical landscape as the ordinary, but in a distinct register of existence. It is maintained through ritual practice, selective acoustic and visual management, a network of epistemic authority that is organized through relational trust and cosmological knowledge, and a web of narrative genres that preserves and validates its existence across generations. It is neither completely a myth, nor solely a legend, nor a merely a sacred grove, nor a symbolic resistance, or social construction, albeit generating all of these qualities as secondary functions. The analytical vocabulary that can accommodate *Rongbin* in full is not yet available. What the *Rongbin Complex* and the extended *Invisible Ritual Complex* establish is an emergent category that attempts to hold invisibility not as

an absence of features but a governing structural aspect of a specific category of Indigenous place-knowledge. What comes hereafter is the need for a full ritual analysis of *Rongbin Asé/Amén* and *Sākphān Rongbin*, examining *Rongbin's* relationship to prohibited magical practices, the ecological implications of Rongbin as a conservation system, and a participatory ecological knowledge framework capable of engaging the community on its own terms. This thesis is where that program begins.

5. Epilogue

5.1. Discussing Invisibility in Tibeto-Burmese cultures

Rongbin Complex is not isolated. It sits within a comparative framework that established the epistemic necessity of this study. Numerous traditions offer a landscape – magical, religious, or spiritual – that exist in systematic non-presence, and can only be accessed under exclusive conditions that result into a sophisticated set of cosmologies, rituals, and narrative traditions. The following is a structurally motivated survey of such landscapes, not an exhaustive one (for the lack of space). The intention to include a comparison at this point is also specific. Putting a comparative analysis at the beginning of this text posed a possibility of the entire text being engulfed and only be interpreted through the comparative lens. Therefore, to avoid a forced comparison, this section is added here for more impactful delineation.

Within the Tibeto-Burmese groups, the most extensively theorized and discussed invisible sacred landscape is that of the Buddhist traditions, of *Shambala* and *Sbas Yül*, more commonly known as *Beyül*⁷⁰. Primarily associated with the Nyingma tradition and Guru Rinpoche (*Padmasambhava*), the hidden valleys of *Pemako* (bordering Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet) and *Khembälung* (Nepal) occupy the liminal position of an ordinarily perceptible physical space along with a distinct ontological register that is protected, sacred, and inaccessible to ordinary sensorial perception. “The organization of this space is based on a mandala model in order to pacify and sacralize the soil to install the Buddhist order with the creation of four *Chörtens* at the four cardinal directions.” (Chiron 2020, 6) The mandala itself functions as a “model of ideal and Utopian city to delimit space under hierarchical functions.” (Chiron 2020, 5) The access is mediated through sacred texts (*Lamyig*) that have been strategically obscured.

Among the Lepcha community of Sikkim and Darjeeling hills, the concept close to *Beyül* has also been documented⁷¹. The *Mayel Lyang* of the Lepcha is realized as a non-Buddhist hidden paradise or sacred landscape that exists within the visible territory of the Lepcha geography but in a different realm of presence. *Mayel Lyang* becomes a substantial aspect of the Lepcha cosmological thought and territorial identity. Like *Beyül*, *Mayel Lyang*, that translates roughly to ‘hidden land’ or ‘blessed land.’⁷²

⁷⁰ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beyul>. [for introductory reference only]

⁷¹ See: Lepcha 2025; Scheid 2015

⁷² Source: Reep Pandi Lepcha 2026, Personal Correspondence

Both, *Beyül* and *Rongbin* seem to emerge from an ontological proposition that the landscapes contain modalities of existence that are inhabited or inhabitable, but structured through a systematic inaccessibility that is not geographical but ritualized and relational. *Rongbin* thus becomes a specific articulation of this larger frame through its distinctive rituals, the hiddenness, and the sanctity as presented to be a part of it. *Rongbin* therefore, while being distinctive on its own, does derive from the wider Tibeto-Burmese concept of the hidden landscapes.

Beyond Northeast India, invisibility as a constitutive ontological feature with ritual efficacy can be found in abundance, possessing structural consistency. In the *Tantric*⁷³ practices spanning the Indian subcontinent, it occupies a rather central position than a peripheral one in ritual anthropology. Invisibility in this context is therefore a constitutive feature of one's personhood, that is, one can become imperceptible and invisible through these rituals⁷⁴.

Beyond the Indian boundary, “a *Kharakternyk* (or *Kharakternik*; Ukrainian: *характерник*) was a Zaporozhian Cossack that was credited with possessing magical powers.”⁷⁵ The *Kharakternyk*, a sorcerer, was believed to possess supernatural abilities that included the ability to “to stop blood, charm away pain, catch bullets with bare hands, walk on water and fire, stay underwater for hours, *become invisible*, cast illusions that caused enemies to flee the battlefield in panic.” In my colleague, Nataalka's words, “When I hear you speak of this invisible reality, it reminds me of the *Kharakternyk*. It sounds so similar. They were magicians who would make people disappear to protect them during wars. This is quite similar to what you are saying. I am sure there are many cultures with such phenomena.” (Rygovska 2026, Personal Correspondence) The analogy she established here is of structural invisibility. Hiddenness, for the *Kharakternyk* is also both a form of knowledge and protection.

A cross-cultural comparative study of rituals, practices, and narrative associated with invisibility will require a full-length project. However, the purpose of mentioning these transcultural phenomena is not to establish a universal structure revolving around what I call the *invisible ritual complex*, but a widely prevalent response to a complex and global human intuition and experience of a landscape. The intuition that the landscapes

⁷³ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantra>. [for introductory reference only]

⁷⁴ The 10th century Tantric text *Kākṣhaputatantrā* by *Nāgārjunā* includes the ritual *Atha Adrishyam* – the ritual text to become invisible

⁷⁵ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kharakternyk>. [for introductory reference only]

they inhabit consist of more than what the ordinary senses can access, and that this knowledge of how to either engage or become one with the hidden dimension becomes part of one of the most important and sought after forms of knowledge a community maintains, whether religious or scientific.

5.2. The Social Implications of Invisibility

The term *invisibility* carries a double epistemic burden that this study acknowledges. First, the subject of the ethnography: structural invisibility as an ontological condition maintained as a form of power and preservation of knowledge against destructive forces. Second, that of social violence, a systemic non-seeing imposed on Indigenous communities and their epistemologies by the political and academic machinery of the dominant society.

The two invisibilities are not parallel but dialectical. And *Rongbin* as a conditionally accessible knowledge source is probably the most direct expression of that dialectic. A community subjected to persistent violence makes its most consequential knowledge of protection, unavailable. Concealment through this perspective is a consequence of historical experience. Protection, preservation, and survival turned into resistance.

The administrative category of the Scheduled Tribe (*Mekri*) exemplifies the systemic invisibility obscured within structural ambivalence. Formal recognition that simplifies state governance of communities with radically different histories, languages, cosmologies, and territorial relations under a single homogenous category of a ‘tribe’. The *Rongbin Complex*, as a relational epistemology that overlooks landscape management, cosmological knowledge, and ritual practice, is not recognized to constitute any expertise, by the state. The specialist knowledge of *Kurusars* is either rendered non-existent by administrative parameters or reduced to museum-worthy performance. Sacred landscapes are invisible from the cartographic and developmental registers of the state. This systemic invisibility produces tangible consequences: road constructions, forest clearances, large-scale industrial projects,⁷⁶ and so on, destroying not just the ecology, but also Indigenous lives and livelihoods.

⁷⁶ In June 2025, the Ministry of Mines published a book that was titled, *Geological Potential of Northeast India: A hidden trove of Mineral prospect beneath majestic landscapes*, labelling Northeast Indian landscapes as mere extraction sites for the large-scale industries. (See: Geological Potential of North East India: A hidden trove of Mineral prospect beneath majestic landscape)

The sociology of invisibility implores an epistemic and ethical engagement. Works, such as that of Collins⁷⁷ on interlocking mechanisms that render Indigenous knowledge systematically illegible to academia, Castel⁷⁸ on disaffiliation, and several other critical Indigenous scholarships offer methodological resources to analyze the sociological matrix within which *Rongbin* also operates. Recognizing these tangential aspects is not a supplement to the ethnography but is analytically constitutive of a comprehensive account that needs a much larger platform than an MA thesis to be discussed extensively.

5.3. Next Steps

This thesis is not a completed project but the beginning of one. The most critical future works concern studying the rituals, *Sākphān Rongbin*, *Rongbin Asé/ Rongbin Amén*, connections with Karbi black magic, related phenomena in neighboring Northeast Indian states, comparative analysis with other invisible realities, and so on. The list is endless. Questions like, what does *Rongbin* possess at the level of ritual theory to produce a landscape of conditional invisibility, is an epistemic challenge this thesis has not addressed adequately. The existing theories are yet unequipped to consider seriously that a ritual *can* restructure the ontological constitution of a landscape. Thus, the *Invisible Ritual Complex* that emerges as a consequence of this work must be looked at, as a collection of analytical tools that offer the possibility to accommodate such ontological differences in scholarship realistically.

The second analytical path concerns itself with the *Rongbin Complex's* relationality with what my interlocutors described persistently as black magic or forbidden knowledge. The intention to explore the connection is not incidental. *Rongbin* shares procedural similarities to certain malicious magical practices prevalent among the Karbis that claim to alter certain sensorial capabilities rendering a person disabled or even decapitated. Leaving that plausibility unexplored – even if it leads to a rejection of the claim – would leave the account analytically incomplete, reproducing the same epistemic avoidance that render such knowledge illegible to academia.

The most tangible implication of this work is ecological. *Rongbins*, being densely forested, ritually prohibited, and mediated strictly by the community, function as a de

⁷⁷ See Collins 2019.

⁷⁸ See “Disaffiliation” by Castel, Robert. Also, Goffinet 2016.

facto conservation system that requires no formal institutional designation or support. It does not require to be classified as a sacred grove, or a biodiversity hotspot, or as a heritage listicle. Yet, *Rongbin* has successfully preserved and managed forest lands through generations and centuries. The next phase of this research therefore, can possibly offer to develop a participatory ecological knowledge (PEK) framework that, armed with enough empirical evidence and analysis thereof, propose towards recognizing such conservation strategies to be valuable and functional, without necessarily assimilating them into politically driven, institutional, and extractive machinery. Together, these next steps are substantial, compelling, and open up the scholarship to critically engage with what fieldwork-philosopher Roomet Jakapi calls ‘folk metaphysics.’⁷⁹ Thus, with the *Rongbin Complex* as its foundation, and a multi-theory-engaged analytical architecture, this study offers to open the doors toward a vast area of possible research on what I call the *invisible ritual complex*.

⁷⁹ I use the term 'folk metaphysics' to refer to the pre-theoretical assumptions that individuals and communities hold about the nature and scope of entities, the causal and structural relations between them, and acts and processes considered to be non-physical. The term is thus parallel to 'folk psychology' and 'folk physics'. Folk metaphysics is broader than folk ontology. In analytic philosophy, ontology is often taken as a subdiscipline of metaphysics. Ontology focuses strictly on what exists, while metaphysics covers a wider range of matters, including modality, identity, causality, and the nature of time and change. (Jakapi 2026, Personal Correspondence)

Eestikeelne kokkuvõte

Kaardistamata maailmad: Kirde-India nähtamatud maastikud, põlisrahva teadmised ja varjatud ontoloogiad

Magistriväitekiti käsitleb Kirde-Indias Karbi Anglongis elava karbi põlisrahva uskumusi ja jutupärimust. Karbide seas tuntakse erilisi asulaid, millel on nimi ning kogukonna jaoks oluline tähendus, kuid mida ei ole võimalik näha. Need on nähtamatud külad (Rongbin), mis enamasti jäävad varjatuks ega ilmu maailma nähtavatesse registritesse. Karbide meelest pole Rongbin kadunud ega peidetud asula, sest selle asukoht on teada ja sellega suheldakse. Sel on ulatuslik mõjuvõim, mis ulatub argielust pühaduse valdkonda.

Käesolev etnograafia tugineb üle kahe aasta kestnud välitööle. Töös uuritakse, kuidas Rongbinis avalduvad põlisrahva teadmised maastiku kohta ning rahvaomased ontoloogilised kategooriad, mis ületavad ruumi institutsionaalseid ja kartograafilisi kirjeldusi. Ma ei väida, et karbid "usuvad" Rongbinisse, vaid selgitan probleeme, mis seostuvad teatud analüütilise sõnavara ja mõistetega (näit. varjatus, puudumine, pühadus), mis ei suuda hõlmata Rongbini tähendusvälja selle olulistes nüanssides. Nähtamatus ei ole seega lahendust ootav mõistatus, vaid teatud välistava paigakategooria struktuurne omadus, mida hoitakse alal praktikas, narratiivis ja erilises maastikule suunatud orientatsioonis. Uurimus käsitleb suulisi narratiive, Rongbini paikade tekkelugusid ning välitöödel tehtud tähelepanekuid, kuidas kogukond nähtamatu maastikuga suhestub ja seda suhet korraldab. Töö analüütiliseks raamiks on ontoloogiline pööre antropoloogias, vernakulaarse religiooni teooria, uskumusjutud, üleloomulik muistend ja kohapärimus.

Töö käsitleb maagiat, religiooni, rituaale ja nähtamatust kui usundilist fenomeni. Ehkki religiooniuuringud ja folkloristika on välja arendanud analüütilisi vahendeid, mille abil saame mõista, millesse kogukonnad usuvad, on selle uurimuse keskmes pigem see, mis jääb kättesaamatuks ja varjatuks. Püüan selgitada, mis teeb teatud rahvaomased kategooriad sellisele analüüsile struktuurselt allumatuks, ning otsin lahendusi töös kirjeldatud usundiliste nähtuste mõtestamiseks.

Märksõnad: põlisrahvaste religioonid, nähtamatus, ekspressiivsed žanrid, Kirde-India, karbid

Bibliography

Aisher, Alexander. 2020. "Fieldwork's Return: Troubled Steps Towards a Multispecies Imaginary." *Material Religion*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2020.1794591>.

Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Bennett, Gillian. 1989. "'Belief Stories': The Forgotten Genre." *Western Folklore* 48 (4): 289–311. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1499544>.

- 1999. *Alas, Poor Ghost! Traditions of Belief in Story and Discourse*. Logan: Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt46nwwn>.

Bhattacharjee, Somenath. 2020. "Tradition and Contemporary Changes in the Religious Belief of the Karbi People in Karbi Anglong, Assam." *The Anthropologist* 40 (1-3): 16–33. <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566802.2020/40.1-3.2054>.

Bowman, Marion, and Ülo Valk. 2012. "Introduction: Vernacular Religion, Generic Expressions and the Dynamics of Belief." In *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, edited by Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, 1–19. Sheffield and Oakville: Routledge.

Census of India. 2011. *Assam, Series-19, Part XII-A: District Census Handbook, Karbi Anglong, Village and Town Directory*. Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.

Chiron, Olivier. 2020. "The Sacred Landscape of West Sikkim (Sbas Yul Bras Mo Ljongs): Formation, Transmission and Conservation; the Mandala Issue." *The Tibet Journal* 45 (1): 11–75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27031090>.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2019. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dalziel, Greg. 2016. "The Reputation of a Genre." In *Genre, Text, Interpretation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond*, edited by Kaarina Koski and Frog, 426–448. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

Dégh, Linda. 1996. "What Is a Belief Legend?" *Folklore* 107: 33–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260912>.

- 2001. *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dhanaraju, Vulli, and Dawatshogmo Lama. 2024. "Ecological Values of the Karbi Belief System." In *The Mythistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park*, edited by Dharamsing Teron and Vulli Dhanaraju. New Delhi: Manohar.

- and The'ang Teron. 2025. "Karbi Studies in Northeast India: Tracing the Ideas of Dharamsing Teron". New Delhi: Manohar.

Dowdy, Sean M. 2022. "In the Name of the Father? Northeast India and Problems of National Kinship." *Contemporary South Asia* 30 (2): 291–94. doi:10.1080/09584935.2022.2060341.

Dundes, Alan. 1989. *Folklore Matters*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

- ed. 1965. *The Study of Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- 1980. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1976. "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics." *MLN* 91, no. 6 (1976): 1500–1533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907148>.

Engti, Dhaneswar. 2024. "Social Customs of Karbi Tribe with Particular Reference to Birth, Marriage and Death Rituals." *Heritage Explorer*. Accessed December 21, 2025. https://heritageexplorer.in/ritiniti_details/5.

Engtipi, Anjana. 2024. "The Significance of Oral Narratives in Karbi Society." In *The Mythistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park*, edited by Dharamsing Teron and Vulli Dhanaraju. New Delhi: Manohar.

Frazer, James George. 1922. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. London: Macmillan.

Frog. 2016. "Genres, Genres Everywhere, but Who Knows What to Think? Toward a Semiotic Model." In *Genre, Text, Interpretation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond*, edited by Kaarina Koski and Frog. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 47-89.

Fryberg, Stephanie A., and Sarah S. M. Townsend. 2008. "The Psychology of Invisibility." In *Commemorating Brown: The Social Psychology of Racism and Discrimination*, edited by Glenn Adams, Michael Biernat, Nyla R. Branscombe, Christian S. Crandall, and Linda S. Wrightsman, 173–193. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11681-010>.

Goffinet, Sylvie-Anne. 2016. "La production de la désaffiliation: Ce que nous en apprend l'analyse sociohistorique de Robert Castel." *Journal de l'Alpha*, no. 201. Translated using Google Translate. https://lire-et-ecrire.be/IMG/pdf/ja201_p048_goffinet.pdf.

Goldstein, Diane E., and Amy Shuman. 2012. "The Stigmatized Vernacular: Where Reflexivity Meets Untellability." *Journal of Folklore Research* 49, no. 2: 113–26. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.49.2.113>.

- 2015. "Vernacular Turns: Narrative, Local Knowledge, and the Changed Context of Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 128 (508): 125–145. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.128.508.0125>.

Holbraad, Martin, and Morten Axel Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Honko, Lauri. 1998. "Thick Corpus and Organic Variation: An Introduction." In *Folklore Fellows' Summer School*, edited by Lauri Honko, 3–28. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

Howard, Robert Glenn. 2008. "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (5): 490–513.

Hufford, David J. 1982. *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jenkins, Henry. 2007. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (blog), March 21, 2007. https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2024. "Anticipatory Heritage." *Journal of American Folklore* 137 (543): 85–93.

Koski, Kaarina, and Frog, eds. 2016. *Genre, Text, Interpretation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

- 2016. "The Legend Genre and Narrative Registers." In *Genre, Text, Interpretation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond*, edited by Kaarina Koski and Frog. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 113-137.

Latvala, Pauliina. 2016. "The Use of Narrative Genres within Oral History Texts." In *Genre, Text, Interpretation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Folklore and Beyond*, edited by Kaarina Koski and Frog, 403–424. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

Lepcha, Reep Pandi. 2025. "What's in a Name?: Mutanchi Clan Narratives and Indigenous Ecospirituality." *Religions* 16, no. 8: 945. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16080945>.

Van Leeuwen, Neil. 2014. "Religious Credence Is Not Factual Belief." *Cognition* 133 (3): 698–715. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2014.08.015>.

Lewis, C. S. 1950–1956. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. London: Geoffrey Bles.

Lyngdoh, Margaret. 2021. "Landscapes of Enchantment and Their Usage: A Critical Case Study from the Khasi Ethnic Community of Meghalaya." In *Religion and Senses of Place*, edited by Graham Harvey and Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, 160–176. Religion and the Senses series. Sheffield & Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

- 2023. “Shapeshifting Traditions among the Khasi of Northeast India: Ecological Engagements and Multispecies Relationships.” *Synthesis* 15: 100–125.
- 2023. “Telling the Transformation: Vernacular Tradition-Tropes to Interpret Narratives about Were-Snakes Among the Khasis in Northeast India.” *IRT* 1 (2): 219–250. <https://doi.org/10.1558/irt.26309>.

Magliocco, Sabina. 2012. “Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness.” *Western Folklore* 71 (1): 5–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24550769>.

- 2004. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1948. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Michele Tita and Kareng Ronghangpi. 2023. “The Relationship Between the Karbi and the Dense Forest Environment: The Role of the Kenglong-Po and Other Entities”. *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*. University of Tartu, Estonian National Museum, Estonian Literary Museum, 17, no. 2: 117-134. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2023-0021>.

Mullen, Patrick B. 1972. “Modern Legend and Rumor Theory.” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9 (2/3): 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3814160>.

Noyes, Dorothy. 2008. “Humble Theory.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1: 37–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40206962>.

Oring, Elliott. 2008. “Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth.” *Journal of American Folklore* 121 (480): 127–166. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20487594>.

Pink, Sarah. 2009. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: SAGE.

Pinxten, Rik, Ingrid van Dooren, and Frank Harvey. 1983. *Anthropology of Space: Explorations into the Natural Philosophy and Semantics of the Navajo*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Primiano, Leonard Norman. 1995. "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife." *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1: 37–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1499910>.

Ramirez, Philippe. 2014. *People of the Margins*. New Delhi: Spectrum. ISBN 978-81-8344-063-9. (hal-01446144).

Ronghangpi, Kareng. 2025. *Myth Memory Belief: A Study on Karbi Oral Narratives*. PhD diss., Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/670443>.

- 2024. "The Role of Narratives in Transmitting Traditional Knowledge: Exploring Anomalous Places and Spaces in Karbi Worldview in Context with Kaziranga and Other Places." In *The Mythistory of Kajir Ronghangpi: The Making of Kaziranga National Park*, edited by Dharamsing Teron and Vulli Dhanaraju. New Delhi: Manohar.

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Sarkar, Abhirup. 2025. "Some Notes on the Viability of the 'Humble Approach' in Folkloristics." In-Person Conference Presentation. 14th International Conference of Young Folklorists: Humble Theory and the Power of the Vernacular. University of Tartu. <https://sisu.ut.ee/youngfolklorists2025/>.

Scheid, Claire S. 2014. "Hidden Land and Changing Landscape: Narratives about Mount Khangchendzonga among the Lepcha and the Lhopo." *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions* 1 (1). <https://jisasr.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/hidden-land-and-changing-landscape-narratives-about-mount-khangchendzonga-among-the-lepcha-and-the-lhopo-pdf.pdf>.

- 2015. "Desires of the Recently Dead: Preliminary Observations on Post-Mortem Possession among the Adi of the Eastern Himalayas." *Irish Journal of Anthropology* 18 (2): 101–120.

Sharma, Jatin. n.d. *Karbi Folk Literature: A Study from Historical Perspective*. Dr B.K.B. College, Puranigudam, Assam, India. Circulated Privately.

- n.d. “‘Chomangkan’ of the Karbis of North-East India: A Sociological Perspective.” Dr B.K.B. College, Puranigudam, Nagaon, Assam, India. https://bkbcollge.in/upload/research_work/1669742144.pdf.

Social Custom of the Karbis: A Study within Folkloristic Perspective. n.d. Dr Birinchi Kumar Barooah College Digital Library. https://bkbcollge.in/upload/research_work/1669789600.pdf.

Stack, Edward. 1908. *The Mikirs; From the Papers of the Late Edward Stack*. edited by Sir Charles James Lyall. London: David Nutt. Available online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/48706/48706-h/48706-h.htm>.

Tafjord, Bjørn Ola. 2016. “Towards a Typology of Academic Uses of ‘Indigenous Religion(s)’, or Eight (or Nine) Language Games That Scholars Play with This Phrase.” In *Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)*, 25–51. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004346710_003.

Taylor, Charles. 2021. “Disenchantment—Reenchantment.” In *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now*, edited by George Levine, 57–73. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400838424-006>.

Terangpi, Lartaso. 2020. “Changing Aspects in Karbi Culture, Folklore and Literature.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 8, no. 3 (March): 1801–1807. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2003251.pdf>.

Teron, Dharamsing. 2009. “A Brief History of Karbi Grammar.” *Karbis Of Assam* (blog), July 5, 2009. <https://karbi.wordpress.com/2009/07/05/a-brief-history-of-karbi-grammar/>.

- 2011. *Karbi Studies: Reclaiming the Ancestors’ Voices*. Guwahati: Assam Book Hive.

- ed. 2012. *Karbi Studies: Memories, Myths, Metaphors*. Guwahati: Assam Book Hive.

- and Sikari Tisso, comps. 2012. *Karbi Studies: Folktales from the Fringe*. Guwahati: Assam Book Hive.

- ed. 2014. *Karbi Studies: In Search of the Drongo and Other Stories*. Guwahati: Assam Book Hive.
- n.d. *Understanding Karbi Philosophy of Life*. Privately circulated manuscript.

Teron, The'ang. 2020. "The Mosera Epics in Karbi Ritual: Documentation and Problem of Textualization." MA diss. University of Tartu. <http://hdl.handle.net/10062/69930>.

Tilley, Christopher. 1994. *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. London: John Murray.

Valk, Ülo. 2015. "Conceiving the Supernatural through Variation in Experience Stories: Assistant Spirits and Were-Tigers in the Belief Narratives of Assam." *Shaman* 23, no. 1-2 (2015): 141–164.

- and S. Lourdasamy. 2007. "Village Deities of Tamil Nadu in Myths and Legends: The Narrated Experience." *Asian Folklore Studies* 66 (1/2): 179–199. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30030456>.

- and Marion Bowman, eds. 2022. *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Belief*. London: Equinox.

- and Daniel Sävborg, eds. 2018. *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

- 2018. "Ontological Liminality of Ghosts: The Case of a Haunted Hospital" in *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 1998. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (3): 469–488. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.

Appendix

Appendix A. Fieldwork Questionnaire 2026

After the first fieldwork in 2025, a thorough questionnaire was developed for the second fieldwork. Following is the set of questions that were asked to all the interlocutors during the fieldwork in 2026. Only the first questions are mentioned here. Each question was followed by several other questions. Adding all the questions here would be impractical. This appendix is for reference only.

- How do you decide whether to share your experiences or knowledge of *Rongbin* with someone?
 - o Why did you trust me with your stories?
- How do you navigate through stories of *Rongbin* that contradicts your own experiences or knowledge?
 - o Sharing the stories we have heard to get more specific response
- Is it common to speak of *Rongbin* among the Karbis?
 - o Who told you, their stories?
- How do you know if someone is from *Rongbin*?
- How do people of *Rongbin* deal with death?
 - o Are the practices and rituals of death same there?
- Does *Rongbin* have malevolent entities?
 - o Do people get possessed?
- Why do people keep searching for *Rongbin*?
 - o What do you expect to find?
- Do you know when *Rongbin* first came into existence?
- Have you been to *Rongbin*?
 - o Have you known anyone who has been there?
- Could you share your experiences of *Rongbin*?

Appendix B. Fieldwork Photographs



Figure 1: First interaction and conversation on Karbi legends and uncanny encounters in Diphu



Figure 2: The haunted house in Diphu; the Chékéma chased the tenant away because Péng Karkli was not performed for a long time



Figure 3: At MBKSS office in Diphu, Karbi Anglong; from left to right – Sabina Teronpi, Dr Kareng Ronghangpi, Dr Margaret Lyngdoh, Banban Talang, Abhirup



Figure 4: Banban Talang, fieldwork assistant during our walk to Rongbin in 2025, dressed in Karbi Attire

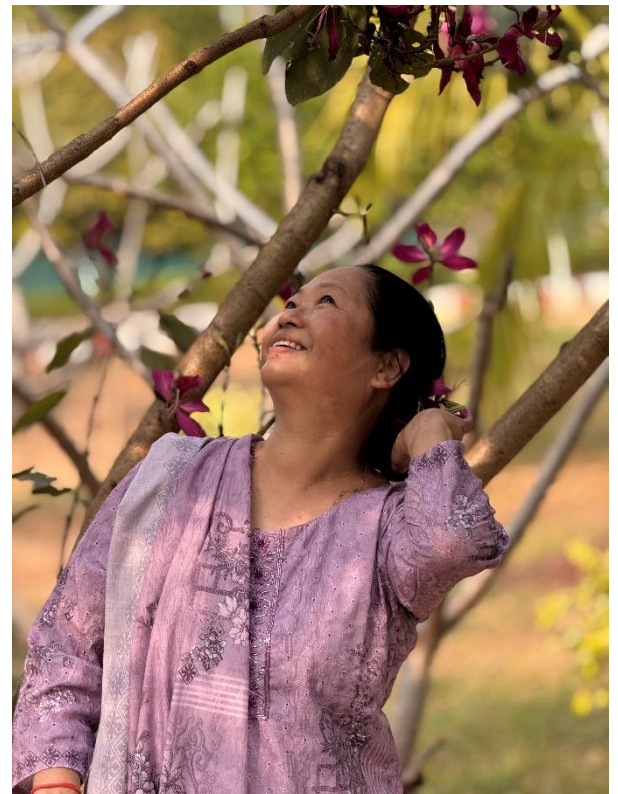


Figure 5: Sabina Teronpi, the organizer of the Rongbin walk in 2025



Figure 6: The artisans of MBKSS NGO making hand-crafted baskets who were visited before the walk to Rongbin in 2025



Figure 7: The beginning of the Rongbin walk in 2025



Figure 8: The edge, between the farmland and forest, Rongbin Walk 2025



Figure 9: The boundary that was marked as the entrance to Rongbin, 2025



Figure 10: Waiting for the altar location to be found for veneration, before entering the forest, Rongbin Walk 2025



Figure 12: Climbing up to the location of the altar for veneration during the Rongbin walk in 2025



Figure 11: The packet of rice and egg that Kurusar Dhoniram carried for protection



Figure 13: The altar, ready for veneration to seek permission to enter Rongbin forest, 2025



Figure 14: Dr Kareng Ronghangpi and Dr Margaret Lyngdoh participating in the veneration ritual



Figure 15: The discussion with interlocutors after the veneration ritual, Rongbin walk 2025



Figure 16: The cave-like structures that were pointed out to be dwellings of Rongbin people



Figure 17: Walking out of the Rongbin forest, Rongbin walk 2025



Figure 18: Discussion with scholars and friends from Northeast India. From left to right: Abhirup, Dr Margaret Lyngdoh, Dr Talilula, Dr Dharamsing Teron, Elwin Teron, Banban Talang after the Rongbin walk in 2025

Thesis Draft_Abhirup Goals 63 Overall score

A Brief Socio-Political History

Karbi territorial history is mapped by regular mobility. Traditional and Ahom records suggest that Karbis might have originally inhabited the riverine parts of the Kalang and Kopili rivers, as well as the Kaziranga region before the Burmese incursions in the early 19th century that forced them to retreat towards the central massif. (Stack & Lyall 1908, 15-17; Dowdy 2022, page?) This transition also introduced Assamese refugees into the Karbi society through ritualized adoption. The fundamental unit of a Karbi social organization is the Kur, the exogamous, patrilineal clan system. (Engti 2024, n.d.) The five primary clans are, Teron, Terang, Ingti, Ejang, and Timung. They are further segmented into numerous sub-clans and distributed across the plains and the hills. (Teron 2020, 4) Marriage within the same clan, Kursenem

"Kursenem' the marriage between a boy and a girl of the same clan is a punishable crime." In Social Custom of the Karbis: A Study within Folkloristic Perspective

, is an irrevocable transgression. Kurkepon

"Kurkepon' is another important feature and ritual associated with through which a child without a father or a non-Karbi person is converted to the Karbis and given a clan of the community." In Social Custom of the Karbis: A Study within Folkloristic Perspective

, is the ritual mechanism that integrates non-Karbis or children of

⚠ Formatting tools are not available. 13,750 words

Review suggestions | Write with generative AI | **Check for AI text & plagiarism**

Plagiarism and AI text check Chicago

- This text matches - Determinants Of Muzakki'...
- This section resembles AI text
- This text matches - Luo Mythology | Mythosphere
- This section resembles AI text
- This section resembles AI text
- This section resembles AI text
- This text matches - The Divine Feminine In...
- This text matches - Somatosensory wearable...
- This text matches - Genre - text - interpretation:...

1% of your text matches external sources
Matches were found on the web or in academic databases

1% of your text has patterns that resemble AI text
These patterns may show AI text or occur in your writing

Figure 19: AI-text check results part 1

Thesis Draft_Abhirup 2 Goals 57 Overall score

different performers, clans, and regions." (Ronghangpi 2025, 152) These discussions therefore informed the social structure as to who uses a genre, when, where, and how. These conversations thus, were not disjoint to Rongbin. (Frog 2016, 65)

Part 14: The Chojun

"Chojun is fundamentally a ritual of ancestor veneration, where a host pays homage to the spirits of their third-generation ancestors. This act of propitiation is crucial aspect of Karbi spiritual practice, demonstrating respect and maintaining a connection with the lineage... a cornerstone of the Hem Angtar, the spiritual heart of a Karbi household, Chojun is a profoundly intricate ritual that transcends a simple 'eat-drink' (Cho-jun) gathering. It serves as a comprehensive propitiation, honoring a pantheon of deities, including Arnamkethe (the Great Spirit), Barithe (the Sky Spirit), Sar (Ancestral Spirits), and a multitude of other spiritual entities." (Dhanaraju & Teron 2025, 253)

This particular Chojun that we were invited to, drew almost a thousand people and occupied the full day. The ritual was elaborate. Before RM, our primary interlocutor and host at this event along with TJ, our translator on this trip shared their knowledge on Rongbin, we had a brief introduction to Chojun and the processes that they were going to perform that day. Among several other details, we were told that the "offerings were made so that the sun does not dry the crops." "That the sacrificed nins who are already chosen to be sacrificed for a particular

⚠ Formatting tools are not available. 12,473 words

Review suggestions | Write with generative AI | **Check for AI text & plagiarism**

Plagiarism and AI text check Chicago

- This section resembles AI text

Our detector looks for common AI text patterns, which it may also find in text you write. If you use generative AI, you can cite it.

Generate citation Dismiss

We didn't detect plagiarism
Your document doesn't match anything in our references

We didn't detect common AI text patterns
Your document doesn't appear to contain AI-generated text

Figure 20: AI-text check results part 2

Appendix C. Research Protocol Adherence from Centre for Karbi Studies



Research Protocol: Centre for Karbi Studies

1. This Research Protocol establishes a comprehensive ethical framework for conducting research involving Indigenous knowledge systems, with particular reference to the Karbi community. It seeks to ensure that all research activities are grounded in respect for cultural values, customary practices, and community sovereignty. The protocol emphasizes the protection of Indigenous intellectual and cultural heritage while promoting responsible, reciprocal, and community-centered research. It also aims to prevent exploitation, misrepresentation, or unauthorized use of traditional knowledge, and to encourage collaborative engagement that benefits both the researcher and the community.

1.1 The Researcher shall demonstrate the highest level of respect for the traditions, customs, rituals, and belief systems of the Karbi community. This includes sensitivity to cultural protocols, social norms, and local governance structures. The researcher must approach all interactions with humility, cultural awareness, and a willingness to learn, ensuring that no aspect of the research disrupts or disrespects community practices or values.

1.2 The Researcher is required to obtain free, prior, and informed consent from relevant community authorities, including village leaders, elders, and knowledge holders, before initiating any research activities. This process must involve clear communication regarding the purpose, methods, potential impacts, and expected outcomes of the research in a language and form understandable to the community. Consent must be voluntary, ongoing, and will be subject to withdrawal upon violation of research ethics.

1.3 The Researcher shall actively involve community members in the research process as collaborators, contributors, or co-researchers wherever feasible. This includes participation in data collection, interpretation, and validation of findings. Such engagement recognizes the community as knowledge holders rather than mere subjects of study, thereby fostering a participatory and inclusive research environment.

1.4 All knowledge, narratives, practices, and cultural expressions shared during the course of the research shall remain the intellectual and cultural property of the Karbi community. The Researcher acknowledges that such knowledge is collectively owned and cannot be claimed, patented, or used for commercial purposes without explicit community consent and/or involvement.

1.5 The Researcher agrees to document all information accurately, faithfully, and respectfully, ensuring that the original meanings, contexts, and nuances are preserved. Any form of distortion, selective representation, or decontextualization that may misrepresent the community's knowledge systems is strictly prohibited.

1.6 The Researcher shall exercise strict caution in handling sacred, sensitive, or confidential knowledge. Such knowledge shall not be recorded, reproduced, published, or disseminated in any form without explicit and informed permission from the appropriate custodians. The researcher must respect cultural boundaries regarding what can and cannot be shared publicly.

1.7 The Researcher is committed to ensuring that the research process and its outcomes contribute meaningfully to the well-being of the Karbi community. This may include sharing research findings in accessible formats, supporting local capacity-building initiatives, providing educational resources, or engaging in community development activities. The principle of reciprocity requires that the research relationship is not extractive but mutually beneficial, with clearly defined and agreed-upon benefits.

1.8 The Researcher shall present all research findings, interpretations, and outputs to Centre for Karbi Studies or the community prior to publication or public dissemination. This process allows community members and knowledge holders to review, verify, and validate the accuracy and representation of their knowledge. Any concerns or corrections raised by the community must be incorporated to ensure authenticity and integrity.

1.9 The Researcher agrees to submit copies of all collected data, including audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, photographs, and research outputs, to the Centre for Karbi Studies (CKS). This ensures proper documentation, preservation, and long-term accessibility of knowledge for the benefit of the Karbi community. The Centre will serve as a repository and custodian of these materials, safeguarding them for future generations.

1.10 The Researcher shall maintain complete transparency regarding research objectives, methodologies, funding sources, and institutional affiliations. The researcher is accountable to both the Karbi community and the Centre for Karbi Studies, and must conduct the research with integrity, honesty, and responsibility. Any changes in research scope or intention must be clearly communicated to all stakeholders.

1.11 The Researcher must provide proper acknowledgment to all individuals, communities, and sources from whom data and knowledge have been obtained. This includes recognizing the contributions of informants, elders, and knowledge holders in publications, presentations, and other outputs. Citations must be accurate and respectful, ensuring that the origins of the knowledge are clearly and appropriately credited.

Centre for Karbi Studies
Dr Kareng Ronghangpi
Research Associate (CKS)



Signature:

Date: 23.04.2026

Researcher / Institution
Name: Abhirup Sarkar
Affiliation: University of Tartu
Date: 23.04.2026

Non-exclusive Licence to Reproduce the Thesis and Make the Thesis Public

I, Abhirup Sarkar

1. Grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive license) to reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis

Worlds Beyond Maps: Karbi Invisible Landscapes, Indigenous Knowledge, and the Hidden Ontologies from Northeast India,

supervised by Dr Margaret Lyngdoh and Professor Ülo Valk.

2. I grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives, under the Creative Commons license CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright.
3. I am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2.
4. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive license does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.

Abhirup Sarkar

19/05/2026