

Cultural Hijacking: Clash of Storyworlds

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India is home to hundreds of indigenous people. The Karbi community is one of the significant indigenous populations of Assam, Northeast India. Karbi are culturally and historically distinct from the majority Hindu population of India. The Karbi worldmaking process is ritually mediated through indigenous knowledge conventions. When dealing with storyworlds¹, I am using the term 'Storyworld' from a folkloristics approach to understand storytelling as means of sense making and continuously engaging in the creation of a storyworld that a culture per se inhabits. It is problematic to subscribe to a single narrative/myth or history. This can homogenize complex fields. Marginal storyworlds comprise of narratives that are local, vernacular, and non-mainstream that are neglected in the re-imaginings of a one world homogenous storyworld. Some myths from some storyworlds are more powerful than the others, and hierarchies are formed when they collide. The hijacking and appropriation of marginal storyworlds by colonial storyworlds is a present-day reality with different hegemonies run by the same agenda.



Fig. 1 (left): A group of young Karbi boys and girls in traditional attire partaking in the cultural festivities at the Karbi Youth Festival (Image courtesy of DS Teron, 2015).

Fig. 2 (above): The Entrance to Lokhimon Ashram, Dolamara, Karbi Anglong (Image by the author, 2022).

Myths, storyworlds, and world-building

I will be employing the term 'mythopolitics' as a conceptual framework to understand the interactions between different competing storyworlds. I am part of the Mythopol project² that seeks to interpret and deconstruct the role of hegemonic Hindu storyworlds in the contemporary politics. I see mythopolitics as an interdisciplinary concept that applies insights from politics, religion, and folklore to acknowledge the multidimensional aspects of competing storyworlds. In reality neither is free of the other as neither would exist without the other. Mythopolitics³ is a developing concept that focuses on the present day trends of world-building processes to probe into the possible futures by trying to realize the facets of negotiations, re-imaginings and re-interpretations of the competing hegemonic storyworlds underpinning identity and belonging.

Karbi people speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect and there are numerous expressive verbal repertoires in the Karbi convention. The Karbi way of life stems from the belief in and propitiation of multiple protective spirits. They are animist in the traditional indigenous Karbi religious sense. Karbi indigenous religion is a cornerstone that shapes the belief system and gives meaning to the world that they inhabit.⁴ It entails the co-creation – a collectively held, embodied, and reciprocal knowledge system. As a product of oral tradition, folklores and narratives serve as the only source for Karbi history and understanding one's own culture. The Karbi are one of the many indigenous populations at the periphery persistently battling for rights and equity over status, identity, and representation.⁵ There is an increasing rate of acculturation, assimilation, and asymmetrical power relations aimed at the homogenization of the Karbi culture into the folds of the

mainstream Hindu right-wing nationalist agenda. To understand the processes of internal colonization by majoritarian forces against the Karbi is the focus of this article. I look at it from the perspective of "cultural hijacking." I use this term to actually look at how majoritarian cultures exert their ideologies by changing the lens of minoritarians through alteration of worldview, knowledge system, and one's cultural understanding of identity and belonging. Through uniformity and homogenization tactics the cultural blueprints of a community are replaced with new ideas of the hijackers. The study on the new religious movement *Lokhimon* will be central in framing my arguments, a group vital for understanding the transformation, conversion, and identity politics. In the discussion that follows, I will attempt to show how Hindu myths created by Hindu nationalists have captured and tailored the imaginations of the Karbi people through media, language, and politics.

Myths are hierarchical in nature, and narratives become competitive in situations of asymmetrical power relations. The notion of coexistence is seen from the vantage of the victors, and more than often, the 'us versus them' narrative continues to clog imaginations perpetually fixed in a binary opposing system.

In the world-building processes, narratives dictate and shape the world(s). A storyworld is and also the outcome of the world-building which entails a culture's particular ways of exhibiting itself embedded with notions of identity, language, cultural practices and knowledge systems. Myths are essential, as they legitimize and form the foundations of identities, communities, and even nations. For marginal communities, it is taxing to subscribe to a single narrative/myth, or to a history of uniformity, assimilation, hegemony, othering, and silencing. As some myths are more compelling than others, being carriers of storyworlds, it is consequential when it

collides.⁶ Throughout history, many worlds have constantly engaged in power struggles and waged war based on differences in thoughts, words, and actions. An alternative to a one world-world issue could be the acceptance of heterogeneity and multiplicity.

The world we see and experience is an outcome of our perception, but what about the others' perceptions?⁷ The difference is perceived as something of the unknown, and the inability to comprehend the unknown as others do results in a tendency toward rejection and assimilation. Variation and inconsistency – that is, narratives other than what is condoned, uniform, and sanctioned – are disputed in a society that feeds on homogenized ideals. The conception of Karbi identity and history is a classic case of hegemony, domination, marginalization, misappropriation, and misinterpretation. For long, Karbi people have been referred to as 'Mikir' (a derogatory misnomer), firstly by the British administration and later by post-colonial India until very recent times.⁸ The Karbi history is absent in the discourse of the Indian education system, there's hardly any acknowledging mentions in the grand narrative.

Cultural hijacking as a phenomenon

The term 'cultural hijacking' is an established concept in the study of cultural forms and spatial practices of branding. The nation branding post-independence politics has painted India and its peripheries with ideas of citizenship through religion, media and language. In Karbi Anglong, modes of education are mainly transmitted either through English, Hindi or Assamese. Karbi religious practices and cultural values are either diluted or transformed into becoming a more Hindu based variants in the present situation. I see cultural hijacking

as a phenomenon that incapacitates the host (culture bearers) by dissolving the cultural values, displacement of one's own understanding, and detachments to land, language, and cultural ownership at the behest of the hijackers. It is from this standpoint, I use this concept to analyze and explicate the hegemonic Hindu mythic storyworld and its effects on the marginal storyworlds from the context of Karbi culture. No doubt the eventual outcome of cultural hijacking is a complete assimilation process over time, albeit from the stance of internal colonization. Ashworth and Kavaritz elucidate how the notion of branding and hijacking are related.⁹

The problem stemming from majoritarian versus minoritarian claims in India predates the British era, but British colonization played an instrumental role in instituting new hierarchical formations within South Asian communities. The 'Hindu storyworld and Karbi storyworld' are simultaneously in an arena of contestation and conflict. Culture or cultural traits go on to have a life of their own in everyday repetition and re-enactments through lived performances. Constant interruption in this flow of everyday embodied practices will definitely change the course and may even replace it. There are origin or creation myths behind every Karbi traditional ritual practices that inform the Karbi people about their world. Orality plays the most vital role in the Karbi world-building process. Repetition and constant engagement with the ritual performances endow possibilities for continuity in shared and lived reality. Point of rupture ensued in the 1900s through the colonial religious classification schemes which enabled the dominant Hindu culture to intervene and impose majoritarian values.¹⁰ Hindu Mahasabha (an organ of Hindu nationalist organization) and associated working as Hindu census supervisors post 1920s rallied in the tribal populated areas of Assam to propagate Hindu beliefs.

This incident harkens the hijacking of a Karbi storyworld by majoritarian Hindu storyworld through power, religio-politics and administrative means.

The importance of storytelling is vital in what a human tells themselves about themselves. The power of collective imagination is what gives power to the group of humans that tell that story. The Karbi could have been telling their story from much earlier on if equity, reciprocity, and acknowledgement were considered. The colonial mindset presupposed that it was the colonizer's duty to shape the different storyworlds on their own. By employing the colonial-centric logic, the British hijacked the Hindu storyworld and appropriated the legacy of hijacking of other storyworlds. This has left consequential ripples across different space-times nationwide in India.

For marginal communities like the Karbi, the aftermath of European colonialism is a present-day reality in the form of homogenization and majoritarian politics, with different actors run by the same agenda. One of the aftermath of religious classification schemes gave birth to *Lokhimon*, a new religious movement among the Karbi in the 1950s and since its inception the group continues to grow in number promoting Hindu ideals and attracting spectacles from the center. It is one of the many cogs in the wheel that are steered by the Hindu right-wing nationalists and their vision of India as a homogenized Hindu Rashtra. To explicate this argument, I would like to share an encounter with an Uber driver during my fieldwork in Assam, India. While I was traveling, the Uber driver, who was keen on discussing politics remarked, "It's all about the packaging. The labels are different, but the content is still the same." I could straight away infer, as he belonged to the 'Goria' community (an Assamese group that converted to Islam during the 1600s Mughal era) and who himself faced bouts of racism and othering. His interpretation was very allegorical to the present *Lokhimon* case indicating the shift in association of identity and belief are proportional to power dynamics and majoritarian influences.

One of the many consequences of cultural hijacking as a rupture in cultural practices displaces lived experience and cultural embodiment. Liefsen explains a trait of settler colonialism that is apt to the hijacking phenomenon: "Wolfe seeks to identify a set of key features that in one way or another imply elimination – spanning a spectrum of strategies from genocide to conversion and assimilation."¹¹ Once new programs are installed, the hijacking of a culture subliminally conditions cultural practitioners into new beings automated to follow new protocols. This creates a sense of 'social distancing' and deep resentment toward one's traditional cultural values and belief systems among the culture bearers. In the same vein, *Lokhimon* followers denounce Karbi traditional practices and refrain from participating in traditional rituals as they see it unfit and less moral. Instead, the followers perform a Hinduized devotion by chanting hymns and offering prayers based on the teachings of Vaishnavism (patrons of lord Vishnu) and lead a 'new' Hindu lifestyle. Karbi traditional practices are seen as something 'less than'.

From this point of view, it cannot be truer than the current status quo of India marred by communal party politics and the hijacking of other cultures. Hindu right-wing politics' scope of homogenizing India reflects a mindset of a community that was once under a long 250 years of British colonizers. There is certainly a stench of colonial hangover in the recent dispensation which underlines cultural hijacking through administrative implementations such as the CAA ('Citizenship Amendment Act'), the demolition of Babri Masjid and rebuilding of Ram Mandir, the Jammu and Kashmir reorganization act.

The new religious movement of a one-world paradigm

In the post-colonial era, Hindu right-wing nationalists have emerged as one of the main cultural hijackers of the Karbi storyworld in

Northeast India. As discussed earlier, the hijacking process entails the deployment of Hindu ideals and myths in place of Karbi traditional belief system. The lived reality of Karbi cultural practices are geographical, contextual and subjective, and these components define the Karbi storyworld. In recent years, the constant re-enforcement of Hindu ideals by the Hindu nationalist party through politics, economics, and religion, has resulted in an inclination of the Karbi population toward the reception of a 'grand Hindu tradition'. At present, the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) is the ruling party in the Karbi Anglong district and Assam. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's latest visit to *Lokhimon* Ashram at Dolamara on 5 October 2021 for the purpose of *Rat Chingrum Amaï* (lit. "a religious solidarity meet") marked a direct governmental aid in terms of finance and resources for the establishment of *Lokhimon* temples. This is one reference to cultural hijacking that reflects the majoritarian political power struggle bent on homogenization, through political representation and religious sanctions reshaping the Karbi storyworld.

The impacts of homogenization brought about the first new religious reform movement¹² among the Karbi during the late 1950s. This movement was known as "*Lokhimon* Sangha," which sought to reform the old Karbi religious belief system, labeling it redundant and outdated. *Lokhimon* fashioned itself in an organized, uniform, and institutionalized religious system, drawing from its Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad counterparts (VHP). *Lokhimon* is one of the many examples of the new religious movements boom in Northeast India led by Hindu nationalist right-wing politics.

Lokhimon religion is viewed as a sect of Vaishnavism in the current iteration, and in its formative days, it included many fascinating yet confusing overlaps of deities. The spiritual leader, Lokhon Ingti Hensek, is still worshipped as the avatar of Vishnu [as well as] the amalgamation of all the incarnations of Karbi heroes, deities, and prominent Hindu gods/goddesses. The religion of *Lokhimon* was founded on February 5th, 1959, by the spiritual leader alongside his followers. Lokhon is revered as the creator/ruler of the universe/source of all moral authority, a supreme being, with mystical abilities, a reformer, and the harbinger of Truth. The practices of *Lokhimon* differ from that of the old traditional Karbi belief system mainly in the aspects of sacrificial offerings, usage of alcohol in rituals, and the consumption of meat. There is a gap widening within the Karbi storyworld, between the *Lokhimon* followers and the traditional Karbi culture bearers in practices, interpretation and reception of cultural repertoires.

Lokhimon is a departure from the old Karbi oral tradition in practice and belief, in the name of reform, the spiritual leader has manufactured new laws and norms to command his followers. New hymns and prayers are crafted in the fashion of *kirtan* or Hindu prayer recitation to eulogize his supreme and invincible status. Lokhon Ingti Hensek in the *Lokhimon* religion is a prominent, central, and god figure.

It is noteworthy that Dolamara, where the *Lokhimon* movement has its origin, was a site of resistance to the growing missionary activities. Dolamara and the surrounding areas have been reportedly Christianized since the late 1800s, and it is evident that the Karbi folks living in those areas chose to resist conversions to Christianity and to adopt Hinduism as an alternative. In 1921, the Assam Census Report posited that the borderline between Hinduism and Animism as vague and operating side by side with Hindu customs making it one and the same. The Hindu Mahasabha of Assam resorted to this census by launching propaganda campaign to do away with the distinction and persuade all Animists as genuine Hindus.¹³ The battle of faith ensued for the non-Christian Karbi population of Dolamara as an identity reclamation strategy. The early leaders responsible for the creation of *Lokhimon* had strong inclination and ties with the Hindu nationalist organization and were patrons of the Hindu religion. I suspect this case to

have elements of both strategic essentialism¹⁴ and complete assimilation. In the case of the former, the *Lokhimon* leaders sought to transform themselves into something akin to the institutions of Hinduism in order to compete with the missionary adversary of the time. However, from the latter point of view, it is evident that the Hindu counterparts were divisive in restoring a stronghold and securing its spheres of influence as two major religious institutions were at a tug of war. In the current situation, the position of missionary control has waned as the result of the majoritarian Hindu-right wing state-run homogenizing politics. *Lokhimon* in its core belief aims to reform Karbi culture. In practice, this is more difficult to distinguish. The process of cultural hijacking is apparent in displacing Karbi roots in place of Hindu ideals. This case begs a question, "How much is enough?"

Bearing this in mind the concept of cultural hijacking is vital in the understanding of cross-cultural interactions between the Karbi storyworld and Hindu storyworld. The creation of NRM groups reveal the causes and effects of the Hindu-Rashtra assimilation processes as my study has shown. I see *Lokhimon* as a liminal space or what I would like to call a "dialogue space" between the two parties (i.e., the Hindu right-wing and

the Karbi). Now, this dialogue space is crucial in analyzing the facets of negotiation and the relationships the Karbi have with Hindu majoritarian influences. *Lokhimon* is one of the index markers that exhibit cultural assertion in the form of strategic essentialism where agency and representation are at stake. The present study shows a one-way track for the Karbi in this dialogue space. As I have enumerated earlier, the practices and affiliations *Lokhimon* are tilting towards the endorsement of Hinduism as opposed to the Karbi traditional belief. There are critical questions to be asked at this junction while addressing the posterity of Karbi culture: What picture are we building? Who is contributing and who has authority over what is being built and how it has to be? There are no easy solutions, but the spark in re-imagining, re-negotiation and re-inventing "how we see ourselves" while acknowledging and accepting our differences might just be a starting point for dismantling any form of cultural hijacking. Creating spaces consciously for cultures to flourish can enable multiple storyworlds to coexist.

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Notes

- 1 "Storyworld ... is evoked by ... multiple modes of verbal expression [that] can be conceptualized as a liminal realm between factuality and fiction, where everyday reality is transformed by imagination" See : Valk, U. and Sävborg, D. (2018) "Place-Lore, Liminal Storyworld and Ontology of the Supernatural, An Introduction." In *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*, Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg (eds.). Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. p.7-26.
- 2 <https://mythopolitics.mf.no/> (last accessed on 24/08/2022)
- 3 "Project MYTHOPOL will analyse this mythopolitics, as produced in contemporary political moment, in the context of the existing mythological narratives, by the Hindu nationalism and its resistance as the primary tool of creating narratives of identity and belonging." See: Sen, M. (2020) *Mythopolitics in South Asia: The Lifetimes of Powerful Stories*. Available at: <https://mythopolitics.mf.no/> (last accessed on 24/08/2022)
- 4 Ernst Bloch (1995) argues "religious stories of emancipation and oppression possess a utopic function in that these stories reveal the inherent contradictions of human existence and, in so doing, open the door to understanding the need for the transcendence and transformation of existent society. In this sense, religion, while often operating as an ideology of domination, can also be understood as a revolutionary narrative that inspires political commitment to challenge the irrealism of social reality". See Reed, J.P. & Goldstein, W.S. (2022) "An Introduction to the Critical Study of Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements." In *Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements*, Jean-Pierre Reed and Warren S. Goldstein (eds.). New York: Routledge. p.1-27.
- 5 "Indigenous cultures are alive and participate in a process of permanent change. The only way for them to survive is to reinvent themselves, re-creating their identity while maintaining their differences." See Marcos, S. (2022) "Indigenous Spirituality and the Decolonization of Religious Beliefs: Embodied Theology, Collectivity, and Justice." In *Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements*, Jean-Pierre Reed and Warren S. Goldstein (eds.). New York: Routledge. p.231-245.
- 6 "Embracing narrative and particularly fiction can provide one of the most powerful tools for building and exploring plausible futures." See: Stackelberg, P.V. & McDowell, A. (2015) "What in the World? Storyworlds, Science Fiction, and Future Studies." In *Journal of Futures Studies*, December 2015, 20(2). p.25-46.
- 7 "The new post-colonial response is that the differences are not simply matters of belief. They are also a matter of reality. What the world is, is also at stake." See: Law, J (2011) "What's Wrong With A One-

- World World?" This paper was presented to the Centre for the Humanities, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut on 19th September 2011. p.1-13. Available at: <http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2011WhatsWrongWithAOneWorldWorld.pdf> (last accessed 24/08/2022)
- 8 "The name Mikir is that given to the race by the Assamese; its origin is unknown. They call themselves Ārləng, which means man in general." See: Stack, E & Lyall, C (1908). *The Mikirs*. From the papers of the Late Edward Stack. Edited, arranged and supplemented by Sir Charles Lyall. Published under the orders of the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, David Nutt, 57,59, Long Acre, London. p.4.
- 9 "While branding claims to appreciate the role of culture and actually be based on culture, the two are rather disconnected and branding seems often to 'hijack' culture. This 'hijacking' refers to the interpretations of culture that are dominant within place branding, the explicit and implicit reasons this is attempted, the emphasis on certain cultural elements over others and the wider effectiveness of culture-based strategies." See: Kavratzis, M. & Ashworth, G.J. (2015) "Hijacking Culture: The disconnection between place culture and place brands." In *Town Planning Review*, 86(2). p.155-176.
- 10 See Mullan, CS, (1932) *Census of India, 1931, Vol 3, Assam Part 1-Report*
- 11 See Liefsen, E. (2021) "Governance Sensitivities and the Politics of Translation: Rethinking the Colonisation of the Shuar of Ecuador's Amazonian South-East." In *Journal of Latin American Studies*. Cambridge University Press. p.1-25.
- 12 Here I will be categorising *Lokhimon* under the banner of new religious movement. By the term I am referring to the definition provided by 'The Oxford Handbook of Religious Movement', "[NRM] arose in response to the cult controversy of the early 1970s and continued to grow in the wake of a series of headline-grabbing tragedies involving religious groups like the People's Temple and Heaven's Gate ... NRM studies had actually emerged several decades earlier in Japan in the wake of the explosion of religious innovation following the Second World War. Even the name "new religions" is a direct translation of the expression *shin shukyo* that Japanese sociologists coined to refer to this phenomenon." See: Lewis, JR & Tollefsen, IB (2016) "Introduction." In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume 2*, James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tollefsen (eds.). Oxford University Press. p.1-16.
- 13 Mullan (1932) p.189.
- 14 A post-colonial term coined by Gayatri Spivak to show how a minority group asserts resistance by clubbing with the majoritarian's ideals in reclaiming its identity and political goals.