Indigenous means of communication amongst social dignitaries of Hill Karbis of Assam

Robindra Teron
Department of Botany, Diphu Government College, Diphu, Karbi Anglong 782 462, Assam
and
Padmeswar Gogoi
Department of Botany, D.R. College, Golaghat, Assam

Received 9 October 2003

Communication is the lifeline of modern civilization. There exist an indigenous means of communication amongst social dignitaries of the Hill Karbis, Assam, India using a symbol called Lam Kido – made out of bamboo splits. In this study an attempt has been made to trace the origin of Kido and its significance in the social life of the Karbis. The study area covers the western part of Karbi Anglong district, where Lam Kido had its origin and its uses still practiced. Lam Kido, often referred as only Kido, is the official means of communication between a Karbi traditional chief Lindokpo, and his subordinate Habe, who looks after the customs and traditions of a designated area called Longri. Only the Lindokpos enjoy the privilege of sanctioning the making of Kido which of course is preceded by a discussion in the traditional council. The Kido or Royal letter is carried by lower level dignitaries Borsinot and Bormiji. The content of the letter is coded in the form of knots in the tail part of the letter i.e. Kido. The study further revealed that though the message for the Habe is verbally passed through the messenger, the message will be considered authentic only if it is accompanied by the Kido from the sender, Lindokpo.

Keywords: Kido, Lindokpo, Habe, Pinpo, Rongbong, Longri, Traditional Communication Method, Bamboo splits, Hill Karbis, Mikirs.

IPC Int. Cl. 7: G09B 19/24.

The Karbis (formerly known as Mikirs) are an aboriginal group, inhabiting the hills of Karbi Anglong (Mikir Hills) district in Assam state located between latitudes 24° 56’N to 26°36’N and longitudes 92° 7’E to 93° 54’E comprising an area of 10,343 sq kilometers. The western part of Karbi Anglong is divided into three territorial regions called Rongbong namely Rongkhang Rongbong, Chinthong Rongbong and Amri Rongbong. Each Rongbong is under the jurisdiction of a traditional council called Pinpomar anei headed by the chiefs called Lindokpos. Rongkhang Rongbong has four Lindok-
pos, Chinthong has three and Amri has two Lindokpos. Traditionally, Ronghang Lindokpo of Rongkhang Rongbong is highest in position and other Lindokpos follow him. Main office bearers of each Rongbong are as follows:

I Rongkhang Rongbong  
1. Ronghang Lindokpo  
2. Dili (Terang subclan)  
3. Rangpi Lindokpo  
4. Killing Lindokpo  
5. Rongkecho Lindokpo

II Chinthong Rongbong  
1. Hanse (Chinthong) Lindokpo  
2. Tisso Lindokpo  
3. Ronghang Lindokpo

III Amri Rongbong  
1. Rongpi (Durong) Lindokpo  
2. Teron (Langne) Lindokpo

Each Rongbong is again divided into Longri or blocks. The tradition and custom of the area are looked after by a dignitary(ies) called Habe, who is appointed by the Chief. The latter communicates with his Habe through an indigenously developed symbol called Kido. Till today, the practice is continued with dignity. It is noteworthy to mention that such a simple indigenous device has been serving the illiterate Karbi society through decades. At the village level, administration as well as social and ritual matters are under the jurisdiction of Rong Sarthe or village Headman and his assistants. In the present paper an attempt has been made for detailed documentation of Kido and its influence on the society.

Methodology

The first step of data collection was visits to Ronghang Rongbong (under Rongkhang Rongbong) the ancient settlement and capital of the Karbis, in 2002. This area is still considered as the seat of Karbi culture. During the discussions the pinpos (members of traditional council) were first convinced that the work is for academic interest and in no way will it affect their status or positions. They were honoured with country liquor (hor arak) as is the protocol for initiation of talks. The pinpos gave detailed account of the ancient political set up and the present scenario. Then, they narrated the official means of communication between the Lindokpo and his Habe, in-charge of a longri. In this regard the dignitaries were persuaded to make specimens of the Kido for ready reference.

The above accounts were confirmed from elderly people who have vast knowledge of customs and culture. The data were also confirmed from pinpos of other territories (Chinthong and Amri) in order to present undiluted view of the system. For collecting data, the authors visited traditional institutions and villages of retired pinpos which are located in remote jungle areas.
Results

The use of Kido as the official means of communication was introduced during the reign of the Karbi traditional chief Reng Bonghom, whose capital was then at Socheng, now bordering Meghalaya state. Kido is made out of bamboo split (Dendrocalamus hamiltonii Nees & Arn.) traditionally called jintak. The bamboo split is weaved and twisted and a complete Kido resembles a rope with a noose or loop at one end and a tail with protruding piece at the other end (Fig. 1 A, B, C, D). The number of Kido used in a Rongbong corresponds to the number of Lindokpos. Thus in Rongkhang Rongbong, the Royal letter comprises of five Kidos (four Lindokpos and a Dili), Chinthong three Kidos (three Lindokpos) and Amri two Kidos (two Lindokpos). Additional Kidos are made hanging from the loop of the main Kido. It may be mentioned that in Rongkhang Rongbong, the King (Ronghang Lindokpo) is immediately followed by the Dili who is considered as the protector of the remaining three Lindokpos. For this reason, one Kido is included in honour of the Dili, taking the number of Kidos in the letter to five. The whole set of the letter is also referred as Kido.

A Kido is always addressed to a Habe which may be dispatched either during normal circumstances or in case of any public complaint against him. Following types of Kidos are usually dispatched to a Habe:

1. If the tails of the component Kidos do not have knots (Fig. 1 A, B, C), the matter is not serious. It may signify an invitation to attend a meeting to be held at the traditional institution or an intimation for visit by the Lindokpos.

2. The above type of Kido is also sent to concerned Habe in case of complaint against him such as negligence of duty, or having extramarital relationship with other women and other sinful acts. In this situation, the Habe must see the Kindokpo to defend the charges leveled against him. If this Kido is ignored, the Lindokpo may suspend him temporarily, by sending verbal message through the Borsinot and Borniju with an ultimatum for the Habe to present himself physically. If the Habe still remains ignorant, a final Kido to this effect will be dispatched in which all the component Kidos will have knots (Fig 1 D). In such a situation, the Habe will be terminated from his Habeship and a new Habe will be selected, that of course is done from the subclan of the outgoing Hape. Such Kido is called Habepadam kido (Royal letter for termination of Habeship). However, in rare instances, the Lindokpo can reinstate the Habe after receiving a fine as demanded by the traditional council.

Habesico (wife of Habe) is not entitled to receive Kido from the Royal postmen. Further, during dispatch of the final Kido for termination of Habeship, the postmen are not allowed to deliver the letters directly to the Habe, but should hand over to the village Headman or his assistants, who in turn will deliver the same to the addressee. The content of the letter will also be repeated verbally to him (Head-
Fig. 1 — Different types of Kidos

man or his assistants) though it can be decoded from the tail part of the Kido itself. Few cases of removal of Habe from his office as disclosed by the elderly people are given below:

i) Mukhim Habe was forced to relinquish his Habeship for unlawfully marrying his younger brother’s wife.

ii) Bura Habe (Tisso) was charged for raping a widow for which his Habeship was terminated.

iii) Noiteng Habe (Tisso) committed robbery.

iv) Sarbong Habe (Dera) lost his eyesight.

v) Thui Habe could not pay the amount due to him for his appointment as Habe, so he was removed from his post.

vi) Langpher Habe’s son became mad for which, he was removed from his post.

vii) Sarthe Habe committed polygamy.

viii) Rongbong Habe was found to be inefficient in discharging his duties.

Conclusion

Lam kido is the official medium through which the Lindokpo communicate with his Habe, and in an illiterate Karbi society such type of transmission of message had been very effective. Its effect may be compared to the telegraph or postal services of present day. The receipt of the Kido by the addressee is guaranteed, as the Royal postmen are accountable to it. Non-receipt of the message will be
investigated by the Chief and if found guilty, is punished by a fine locally called *adai*, in cash and kind (liquor). In a Karbi society, paying fine or *adai* is most embarrassing for a person and usually lowers his or her status in the society. *Kido*, in other words can be considered as the Royal Stamp, because the message carried by the postmen is considered authentic only if it is accompanied by the *Kido*. The present literate generation hardly shows sign of inclination to learn and preserve such a valuable art which has served the needs of the tribe to which they are affiliated. As the Karbis do not have any written history, year wise event could not be presented. However, this work is mainly based on conversations with elderly people and *pinpos* of the three Rongbongs.

**Acknowledgement**

Authors wish to express their gratitude to Shri Rengsing Teron, Chowkidar Garampani Forest IB, who first pointed the existence of *Kido*. Authors sincerely thank Shri C S Phura (Borgaonbura) and *pinpos* of Rongkhong, Chinthong and Amri Rongbongs for their assistance in completing the work, and Mr. Romen Rongpi for the computer work.

**For Further Reading**