

Ethnicity to Conversion: Role of Christian Missionaries Among Karbi Tribe

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How to cite this article:

Pankaj Protim Bordoloi, Amit Soni, Ethnicity to Conversion: Role of Christian Missionaries Among Karbi Tribe. *Ind J Res Anthropol* 2024;10(2):161-168.

Abstract

The Karbis, an indigenous group primarily inhabiting Assam and nearby regions, have long preserved distinct cultural and religious traditions rooted in animism and nature worship. However, the introduction of Christianity, spearheaded by missionaries during the colonial and post-colonial periods, brought profound changes to their socio-religious landscape. This study examines the Karbi tribe of Northeast India, focusing on their ethnicity, cultural practices, and the transformative impact of Christian missionary efforts on their society. The research explores the methods employed by missionaries to facilitate conversion, including education, health care, and community engagement, while also considering the voluntary and involuntary dimensions of the Karbis' transition to Christianity. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of missionary-led institutions in redefining Karbi identity and fostering social mobility. Additionally, the study interrogates the interplay between tradition and modernity, addressing how the Karbi community has negotiated cultural preservation amidst religious transformation. Through a combination of historical analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, this paper provides nuanced insights into the complexities of religious conversion, the resilience of ethnic identity, and the evolving dynamics between indigenous communities and external influences. The findings reveal a dual narrative of empowerment and cultural displacement, reflecting broader themes of globalization, colonial legacies, and the ongoing redefinition of indigenous identities in contemporary India.

Keywords: Tribe, Ethnicity, Christian Missionary, Social Mobility, Religious Transformation, Cultural Preservation.

INTRODUCTION

The Karbi tribe, an indigenous ethnic group primarily residing in the northeastern Indian

state of Assam, has experienced significant cultural and religious changes due to the influence of Christian missionaries. This complex interaction between ethnicity and religious conversion has had profound impacts on Karbi society, identity, and

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Received on: 10.12.2024 **Accepted on:** 04.02.2025

traditions.

The Karbi people represent one of the most populous and culturally cohesive groups within the Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic family, residing in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, India. Historical accounts suggest that their migration journey began in Mongolia, leading them through China and Tibet, eventually reaching the Irrawaddy Valley in present-day Myanmar. From this region, they further migrated to specific areas within the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, ultimately settling in Socheng. Historically referred to as the 'Mikirs,' the Karbi are recognized as significant contributors to the cultural landscape of Assam. A prominent cultural emblem within Karbi society is the 'Jambili Athon,' which is crafted from the wood of the 'Bengvoi' tree (*Wrightia coccinea* Sims), known for its striking red flowers.

Pre-Colonial Karbi Religious Practices and Beliefs

The Karbi community, indigenous to the northeastern Indian state of Assam, possesses a unique cultural and religious identity rooted in animistic traditions and nature worship. Their pre-colonial religious practices reflect their symbiotic relationship with the environment, their reverence for ancestors, and a well-defined pantheon of deities. These practices were integral to their way of life, shaping their socio-cultural and spiritual worldview of the Karbi Tribe.

The foundation of Karbi religious practices lay in animism, where natural elements were believed to embody spiritual forces^[1]. The Karbis considered rivers, hills, forests, and other natural features as abodes of spirits, known as *riso*. These spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, were perceived as capable of influencing human life and thus required appeasement through rituals and offerings. This animistic worldview emphasized respect for nature, which was central to the Karbi ethos. The Hemphu Mukrang hill, considered sacred, served as a symbolic representation of the Karbis' spiritual connection with nature^[2]. Rituals performed in such natural sites highlighted the inseparability of Karbi religious practices from their ecological surroundings.

The Karbi pantheon included a hierarchy of deities, each associated with specific aspects of life and nature. Hemphu, the supreme deity, was revered as the creator of the universe. Mukrang, another significant deity, symbolized fertility and prosperity, while Arnam was the goddess of crops and agriculture^[3]. These deities were central to the Karbi belief system, reflecting their agricultural and

community-oriented lifestyle. In addition to these major deities, the Karbis believed in numerous minor spirits and guardians who protected specific domains, such as households, forests, or water bodies. These spirits were often invoked during rituals to ensure safety and harmony^[4].

Ancestral worship was a cornerstone of Karbi spirituality. The Karbis believed that the spirits of their ancestors, known as Arnam Kethe, remained connected to their descendants and continued to influence their lives^[5]. Offerings and prayers were made to honor these spirits, seeking their blessings for prosperity and protection from misfortune. Rituals dedicated to ancestors often coincided with significant life events, such as births, marriages, and deaths, underscoring their enduring presence in Karbi religious life.

Agriculture was the primary livelihood of the Karbis, and their religious practices were closely tied to the agricultural cycle. The Rongker festival was one of the most important rituals, performed annually to invoke the blessings of deities and spirits for a bountiful harvest. This festival, marked by communal participation, included offerings, prayers, and animal sacrifices [2]. Through such ceremonies, the Karbis sought to harmonize their relationship with the natural and supernatural realms.

Illness and natural calamities were often attributed to the displeasure of spirits or deities. To address these issues, rituals were performed to appease the offended entities. The Kurus or shamans played a central role in these ceremonies, acting as intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds. The Kurus used chants, offerings, and symbolic acts to diagnose and cure ailments, reflecting the Karbi belief in the spiritual origins of health and well-being^[1].

Life-cycle events, such as birth, marriage, and death, were accompanied by elaborate rituals. These ceremonies often involved the entire community and were aimed at ensuring the favor of spirits and deities. For instance, the Chomangkan, a death ritual, was a significant cultural and religious event where the community collectively honored the departed soul and facilitated its journey to the afterlife^[3].

Shamans, or Kurus, were pivotal figures in Karbi religious practices. They were not only ritual specialists but also healers and spiritual guides. The Kurus possessed extensive knowledge of the Karbi cosmology, including the characteristics and demands of various spirits and deities. Their role as

intermediaries was vital in maintaining harmony between the human and supernatural realms^[5]. Shamanic practices included divination, healing, and exorcism, which were often performed during crises or festivals. The Kurus' ability to interpret omens and communicate with spirits gave them an authoritative position in Karbi society, further reinforcing the centrality of religion in everyday life.

Karbi religious practices were deeply embedded in their social structure. Community involvement was a hallmark of Karbi rituals, reflecting the tribe's cohesive and collective ethos. Rituals were performed at designated sites within the village, such as sacred groves or altars, emphasizing the shared responsibility of religious observance [4]. Elders or village priests often presided over rituals, ensuring the transmission of religious knowledge and practices across generations. This collective approach not only reinforced social bonds but also preserved the Karbi cultural heritage.

The Karbis used art and symbols as expressions of their spirituality. Intricate carvings, pottery, and textiles often depicted deities, spirits, and sacred motifs, serving both decorative and ritualistic purposes. These artistic traditions were integral to the Karbi religious identity and reflected their aesthetic appreciation of the divine^[3].

Arrival of Christian Missionaries in Karbi Anglong, Assam: Colonial Policies and Their Impact

Karbi Anglong, a hill district in Assam, became a focal point for Christian missionary activities during the colonial era. The missionaries' arrival was part of a broader movement to evangelize the indigenous tribes of northeastern India. Their activities were closely intertwined with the British colonial administration, whose policies significantly influenced the trajectory of missionary work. This paper examines the arrival of missionaries in Karbi Anglong, the colonial policies that shaped their endeavors, and the long-term impacts on the Karbi community.

Christian missionary activities in Karbi Anglong began in the mid-19th century, coinciding with the expansion of British colonial rule in the region. The American Baptist Mission was among the first to establish a presence in Assam, with a focus on the hill tribes, including the Karbis^[3].

In the year 1836 Christianity was first introduced to the Mishings by a few Christian missionaries who travelled to Sadiya, the easternmost part of Assam. For the first time, thirty-eight Missing people were

listed as Christians in the Census Reports for the year 1935. Evangelical activities were conducted among the Mishings in North Lakhimpur and Pthalipam during the missionaries' subsequent visit in 1894 Majuli, Sadiya, Telam, Silapathar, Akarjan, and Tarajan are Missing-inhabited places where the missionaries first established English-medium schools and performed charity work.

The Karbis first came into touch with Christianity around 1859. In order to spread and preach Christianity among the tribal people, C.F. Talman and his spouse were dispatched by the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS) to Nagaon and the surrounding districts.

Nurullah and Naik^[6] have observed that "In Bengal and Assam the education of the tribal children has been partly taken up by the direct instrumentality of the state, but chiefly by the missionary societies with help and encouragement from the government".^{[6][7]}

As per Walter Fernandes (Demography and Historiography of the Tribal People in India with Special Reference to North East India), "Majority of the hill tribes were converted to Christianity at a time when interventions of the colonial regime together with those of their dominant class Indian collaborators disrupted their economy and culture and caused an identity and social crisis in their societies. Amid such disruption, change of religion gave them a new identity" [7, p. 36].

These missionaries were motivated by the dual goals of spreading Christianity and "civilizing" the indigenous communities, whom they perceived as animistic and underdeveloped. The missionaries initially faced challenges, including linguistic barriers, geographical isolation, and resistance from the Karbis, who were deeply rooted in their animistic traditions. However, they gradually gained a foothold by adopting a strategic approach that combined education, healthcare, and social services with proselytization^[2].

Colonial Policies and Missionary Activities

The relationship between colonial policies and missionary activities in Karbi Anglong was symbiotic. While the missionaries benefited from the infrastructure and security provided by the British administration, the colonial government used missionary initiatives to consolidate its control over the region. The British administration generally supported missionary efforts in tribal areas, viewing them as a means to pacify and integrate indigenous communities into the colonial framework^[1]. The introduction of Christian

education by missionaries served the colonial agenda by creating a class of literate individuals who could be employed in administrative roles.

The colonial government facilitated missionary work by granting land and building permissions for churches, schools, and hospitals. These facilities became centers for both religious conversion and the dissemination of Western education and healthcare^[3]. Colonial policies often undermined traditional Karbi institutions and practices, creating a vacuum that missionaries were quick to fill. For instance, the codification of tribal land and governance systems disrupted indigenous socio-political structures, making it easier for missionaries to introduce Christian norms and values^[5]. Missionaries often relied on the colonial administration for protection against local opposition. The British authorities, in turn, saw missionary activities as a means to “tame” the tribal population and prevent potential uprisings^[4].

Impact of Missionary Activities

The most significant impact of missionary work was the religious transformation of a section of the Karbi population. By the early 20th century, a noticeable number of Karbis had converted to Christianity, leading to the establishment of Christian communities in Karbi Anglong^[2]. Conversion often involved a break with traditional practices, as new converts were encouraged to abandon animistic rituals and ancestral worship. Missionaries established schools that provided Western-style education in English and Assamese. This had a dual impact: while it opened avenues for socio-economic mobility, it also alienated many Karbis from their traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices^[1] (1986). Missionaries introduced modern healthcare facilities, which contributed to a decline in mortality rates and the spread of medical awareness. Hospitals and dispensaries established by missionaries became crucial in addressing diseases and epidemics, which had previously been attributed to supernatural causes^[3]. The introduction of Christian education and the alignment with colonial authorities empowered some Karbis to engage with modern political and economic systems. However, this often came at the cost of traditional egalitarian social structures, as new hierarchies emerged based on education and religion^[4].

Resistance and Adaptation

Despite the missionaries’ efforts, a significant portion of the Karbi population resisted conversion and retained their traditional beliefs. This resistance

was rooted in the Karbis’ deep attachment to their animistic and communal traditions, which they saw as integral to their identity. Over time, some Karbis adopted a syncretic approach, blending elements of Christianity with traditional practices^[2].

In recent decades, there has been a cultural revival movement among the Karbis aimed at preserving and promoting their indigenous heritage. This movement includes efforts to document traditional rituals, revive festivals, and reassert the importance of ancestral worship^[5]. The arrival of Christian missionaries in Karbi Anglong and the colonial policies that facilitated their activities had far-reaching consequences for the Karbi community. While missionaries introduced education, healthcare, and new opportunities for socio-economic advancement, their efforts also disrupted traditional religious and cultural practices, creating lasting divisions within the community. The complex interplay between missionary activities and colonial policies highlights the dual-edged impact of these historical developments. Today, the Karbi people continue to navigate the legacy of this period as they strive to balance modernization with the preservation of their indigenous identity.

Missionary Strategies in Karbi Anglong: Education, Healthcare, and Language Translation

Christian missionaries in Karbi Anglong, Assam, employed a variety of strategies to introduce and spread their faith among the Karbi people during the colonial period. These strategies extended beyond evangelization to include education, healthcare, and linguistic efforts, reflecting a holistic approach aimed at both religious conversion and social transformation. This paper examines the missionaries’ educational and literacy programs, healthcare initiatives, and the translation of religious texts into the Karbi language, analyzing their long-term impacts on the Karbi community.

Education & Healthcare

One of the primary strategies adopted by missionaries in Karbi Anglong was the establishment of educational institutions. These schools aimed not only to promote literacy but also to introduce Western education and Christian values among the Karbi people. Missionaries founded several schools in Karbi Anglong, with curricula emphasizing literacy, numeracy, and Christian teachings. Education was seen as a powerful tool for conversion, as it allowed missionaries to engage directly with the younger generation^[3]. These schools provided instruction in Assamese and

English, which were regarded as gateways to socio-economic mobility and integration into the colonial administrative framework.

Literacy programs were central to missionary strategies, as the ability to read religious texts was considered crucial for understanding and embracing Christianity. Karbi students were taught to read the Bible and other Christian literature, often translated into Assamese and later into the Karbi language^[2]. This focus on literacy also facilitated the spread of Christian ideas among adults who could not attend formal schooling. While missionary education provided new opportunities for Karbi youth, it also had unintended consequences. The adoption of Western education created a divide between the educated Christian converts and those who remained rooted in traditional practices. The emphasis on Christian values often conflicted with indigenous beliefs, leading to cultural erosion^[5]. Nonetheless, missionary schools laid the groundwork for modern education in the region, contributing to the overall literacy and educational development of Karbi Anglong.

Healthcare was another significant aspect of missionary work in Karbi Anglong. Missionaries introduced modern medical practices to address the health challenges faced by the Karbi community, often linking healthcare with their religious message. Missionaries established hospitals, clinics, and dispensaries in Karbi Anglong, providing access to medical care for the local population. These facilities addressed common ailments, maternal and child health, and infectious diseases, which were prevalent in the region due to poor sanitation and limited access to healthcare^[4]. Healthcare was closely tied to evangelization efforts. Missionaries often treated patients while sharing Christian teachings, using their role as healers to build trust and influence among the Karbi people^[2]. By addressing both physical and spiritual needs, they sought to demonstrate the superiority of Christian values and practices over traditional healing methods. Missionaries also trained Karbi individuals as nurses and medical assistants, creating a cadre of local health workers who could continue their efforts. This not only expanded access to healthcare but also provided employment opportunities, further integrating Karbi converts into the missionary network^[3]. The introduction of modern healthcare significantly improved the health outcomes in Karbi Anglong, reducing mortality rates and addressing long-standing health issues. However, the association of healthcare with Christianity sometimes led to

resistance from those who viewed it as a threat to traditional healing practices and beliefs^[5].

Translation of Religious Texts into Karbi Language

Linguistic engagement was another key strategy employed by missionaries. Recognizing the importance of communicating in the local language, they undertook efforts to translate religious texts into Karbi, facilitating a deeper understanding of Christian teachings. Missionaries invested significant effort in learning the Karbi language and developing written materials. The Bible and other religious texts were translated into Karbi to make them accessible to the local population^[1]. These translations often included explanations of Christian concepts in terms familiar to Karbi cultural and religious traditions, making the new faith more relatable.

Missionaries played a crucial role in the development of a written script for the Karbi language, which had traditionally been an oral language. They used Roman and Assamese scripts to transcribe Karbi, creating the first written records of the language^[3]. This effort not only aided in religious conversion but also contributed to the preservation and standardization of the Karbi language. The translation of religious texts had a dual impact. On the one hand, it facilitated the spread of Christianity by enabling Karbis to engage with the Bible in their own language. On the other hand, it introduced a written tradition to an oral culture, reshaping the way knowledge and stories were transmitted^[2]. While this linguistic work preserved aspects of the Karbi language, it also aligned the language closely with Christian narratives, potentially marginalizing indigenous oral traditions.

The strategies adopted by missionaries in Karbi Anglong had far-reaching effects on the Karbi community, shaping their religious, educational, and cultural landscape. Missionary efforts led to the conversion of a section of the Karbi population to Christianity, creating distinct Christian communities within the larger Karbi society. This sometimes resulted in social and cultural divisions, as converts abandoned traditional practices and adopted new religious and social norms (Longkumer, 2011).

The establishment of schools and healthcare facilities introduced modern institutions to Karbi Anglong, laying the foundation for educational and medical development. These institutions, however, often prioritized Christian teachings

and values, influencing the region's socio-cultural dynamics^[4]. While missionary activities contributed to the erosion of traditional Karbi culture, they also preserved aspects of it through the development of a written language and documentation of oral traditions. This paradoxical legacy continues to shape discussions about cultural identity and revival in Karbi Anglong^[3]. The training of local Karbis as teachers, nurses, and translators empowered individuals and created new opportunities. However, the reliance on missionary institutions also fostered a degree of dependency, as many services were tied to religious conversion^[2].

Karbi Responses to Christianity: Resistance, Syncretism, and Generational Dynamics.

The arrival of Christianity in Karbi Anglong, Assam, during the colonial period marked a profound transformation in the socio-religious life of the Karbi people. Missionary efforts introduced new beliefs and practices, challenging traditional animistic religion. Karbi responses to Christianity were complex and multifaceted, encompassing resistance, partial acceptance, and syncretism, as well as generational shifts in religious adherence. This paper examines these dynamics in detail, focusing on patterns of initial resistance and acceptance, the syncretic blending of traditional and Christian practices, and generational differences in how Christianity was adopted and understood.

Initial Resistance and Acceptance Patterns: Resistance to Christianity

The Karbi people initially resisted Christianity due to its perceived threat to their traditional animistic practices, which were central to their cultural identity. Karbi religion emphasized the veneration of nature spirits (arong) and ancestors, along with elaborate rituals like Chomangkan (a death ceremony), which reinforced social bonds and spiritual continuity^[3]. Missionaries, often dismissing these practices as superstitious, sought to replace them with Christian teachings, sparking resistance. This resistance was not merely theological but also cultural and political. Conversion to Christianity was viewed as a rejection of communal traditions and an alignment with foreign powers. Moreover, Karbi religious practices were deeply tied to their clan structure and governance, making the introduction of Christianity a challenge to the community's socio-political cohesion^[2].

Factors Leading to Acceptance

Over time, several factors facilitated the gradual acceptance of Christianity among some Karbi groups. Missionary schools offered literacy and

knowledge that were seen as pathways to modernity and socioeconomic advancement. Families often converted to ensure their children could benefit from these opportunities^[4]. Missionaries introduced healthcare services, providing treatment for diseases and alleviating suffering in remote areas. This practical assistance earned goodwill and fostered openness to their teachings^[5]. Christianity's egalitarian ideals appealed to marginalized sections of Karbi society, including women and the economically disadvantaged, who saw it as a source of empowerment and social mobility^[1]. Some missionaries contextualized Christianity by incorporating Karbi symbols and metaphors into their teachings. This cultural accommodation reduced resistance and made the new religion more relatable^[2]. Acceptance patterns were uneven, with conversion often occurring at the family or village level, influenced by proximity to missionary centers and the availability of missionary services.

Syncretism Between Traditional Beliefs and Christian Practices, Blending of Beliefs

As Christianity spread, many Karbi converts adopted a syncretic approach, blending elements of their traditional animistic religion with Christian teachings. Syncretism allowed converts to navigate the tension between their spiritual beliefs and cultural identity. For example, while embracing Christian monotheism, many Karbis continued to revere natural elements like rivers and forests, integrating them into their understanding of God^[3]. Traditional festivals and rituals were also modified to incorporate Christian elements. The Chomangkan, for instance, persisted among some Christian families but was accompanied by Christian prayers or hymns. This blending of practices helped maintain cultural continuity while accommodating the new faith^[5]. Missionaries played a significant role in facilitating syncretism by translating Christian texts into the Karbi language and contextualizing Biblical teachings within Karbi folklore and myths. This strategy made Christianity more accessible and less alien to the Karbi people. By aligning certain Christian concepts with Karbi spiritual themes, missionaries ensured that conversion did not necessitate a complete cultural rupture^[4]. While syncretism enabled smoother transitions to Christianity, it also created internal conflicts. Traditionalists often viewed syncretic practices as a betrayal of authentic Karbi culture, while orthodox Christian converts criticized them for compromising the purity of the faith. These tensions highlight the complexities of religious adaptation, as individuals and communities sought

to balance spiritual needs with cultural preservation^[1].

Generational Differences in Religious Adherence

The older generation of Karbis, who grew up practicing animistic traditions, often resisted Christianity more strongly than younger individuals. For them, religious practices were inseparable from their identity and community life. Those who converted frequently retained significant aspects of their traditional beliefs, resulting in hybrid religious practices^[2]. The elders viewed Christianity as a disruption to the cultural continuity they had maintained for generations. They often critiqued converts, especially within their own families, for abandoning ancestral ways and succumbing to foreign influence^[5].

In contrast, the younger generation was more receptive to Christianity, influenced by their exposure to missionary education and the socioeconomic opportunities it offered. For many young Karbis, conversion to Christianity represented not just a spiritual transformation but also a means of engaging with modern institutions and escaping the perceived limitations of traditional practices^[4]. Younger Christians were more likely to adopt Western-style worship practices and fully integrate into Christian communities. This generational shift marked a move away from syncretism toward a more exclusive adherence to Christian teachings.

The divergence in religious adherence between generations often led to conflicts within families and communities. Elders accused the youth of disrespecting their heritage, while younger Christians viewed traditional practices as outdated or incompatible with their modern aspirations. These tensions reflect broader cultural shifts within the Karbi community, as it grappled with the challenges of modernization and globalization^[3].

The Karbi responses to Christianity have left a lasting imprint on their religious and cultural landscape. The coexistence of Christianity and traditional animism has resulted in a unique form of religious pluralism in Karbi Anglong. This pluralism, while enriching, has also led to ongoing debates about identity and cultural preservation^[1]. The blending of Christian and traditional practices has transformed Karbi rituals and festivals, creating new forms of cultural expression that reflect the community's evolving identity^[2]. Missionary contributions to education and healthcare have had lasting benefits, improving literacy and health outcomes. However, these developments also created inequalities, as converts

often had greater access to resources than non-converts^[4]. The differing attitudes of older and younger Karbis toward Christianity continue to shape intergenerational dynamics, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity^[5].

CONCLUSION

The pre-colonial religious practices and beliefs of the Karbi community offer a profound insight into their worldview and way of life. Rooted in animism and deeply intertwined with nature, these practices emphasized harmony, community, and reverence for the spiritual. Despite the challenges posed by colonialism and modernization, the Karbis' efforts to preserve their heritage underscore the enduring significance of their religious and cultural identity. The advent of British colonialism and subsequent missionary activities brought significant changes to Karbi religious practices. Christianity, introduced by missionaries, gradually replaced traditional beliefs among many Karbis, leading to the erosion of indigenous religious practices^[2]. However, pockets of traditional practices persisted, and in recent years, there has been a revivalist movement aimed at preserving and promoting Karbi cultural and religious heritage. While missionary activities brought certain benefits, they also led to the erosion of traditional Karbi culture and social structures. Indigenous rituals, festivals, and art forms declined as Christian converts adopted new religious practices and lifestyles. This cultural shift created divisions within the Karbi community, particularly between converts and non-converts^[5]. The missionary strategies in Karbi Anglong—education and literacy programs, healthcare initiatives, and translation of religious texts—were multifaceted and deeply intertwined with the broader colonial agenda. While these efforts brought significant changes, such as improved literacy and healthcare, they also disrupted traditional Karbi culture and religious practices. The legacy of these strategies remains complex, with ongoing debates about their benefits and challenges. As the Karbi community navigates these legacies, there is a growing emphasis on preserving and revitalizing their indigenous heritage while embracing the positive aspects of missionary contributions. The Karbi responses to Christianity reveal the complex interplay of resistance, adaptation, and transformation in the face of religious and cultural change. Initial resistance reflected the community's desire to preserve its traditional identity, while gradual

acceptance was facilitated by education, healthcare, and cultural contextualization. Syncretism allowed for a blending of old and new beliefs, but also generated tensions within the community. Generational differences further shaped these dynamics, with younger Karbis often embracing Christianity more fully than their elders. Today, the Karbi community continues to navigate the legacy of missionary influence, striving to balance the preservation of its indigenous heritage with the integration of Christian and modern elements. This ongoing journey reflects the resilience and adaptability of the Karbi people in the face of profound social and cultural change.

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