



Weaving through Time: A History of Karbi Textile Traditions in Assam

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical transformation of Karbi textile traditions in Assam from the early nineteenth century to the present, with particular attention to changes in household production, women's labour, Indigenous textile knowledge, weaving technology, and dress practices. Drawing on colonial records, ethnographic writings, oral traditions, community-based sources, and qualitative fieldwork among Karbi weavers and knowledge holders, it traces how textile production changed through encounters with colonial administration, expanding markets, missionary education, commercially produced yarns and fabrics, and subsequent socioeconomic transformations. Historically, Karbi textile production brought together cotton cultivation, fibre preparation, spinning, natural dyeing, weaving, and garment making within a largely household-based system in which women played a central role in the production and intergenerational transmission of textile knowledge. Rather than interpreting subsequent changes as a linear transition from tradition to modernity, the paper argues that Karbi textile history is characterised by continuity through transformation, in which materials, techniques, labour processes, and contexts of production have changed while weaving has retained its cultural significance as an important expression of Karbi identity.

Keywords: - Karbi Textiles; Weaving Traditions; Cotton Cultivation; Indigenous Technology; Colonial Assam.

Introduction

Textiles are significant sources of information about the social, economic, and cultural histories of Indigenous peoples, yet they remain insufficiently incorporated into historical writing. Practices of spinning, dyeing, weaving, and wearing clothing have often been left to ethnography, folklore, and craft studies rather than incorporated into historical inquiry. Yet cloth has a history extending far beyond the manufacture of garments. Textile production involves resource use, cultivation, labour organisation, technological knowledge, exchange, and processes of learning. Appadurai's concept of the "social life of things" draws attention to the ways objects acquire meanings through their production, circulation, and consumption (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). Similarly demonstrates the importance of materiality in the constitution of social relationships, while (Ingold 2013) understanding of making as skilled engagement with materials provides a useful perspective for examining Indigenous weaving practices and the transmission of technical knowledge through observation, participation, and practice.

Textile production in Karbi society provides a valuable entry point for examining the history of cloth-making in Northeast India. Cotton cultivation, fibre preparation, spinning, dyeing, and weaving historically

formed interconnected stages of household production in which women's labour and technical knowledge were particularly important. Nineteenth-century colonial sources indicate that cotton cultivation was significant in the hills inhabited by the Karbis, then commonly referred to in colonial records as “Mikirs.” John Butler’s account provides evidence of cotton within tributary and exchange relations involving the Karbis (Butler 1855, 127), while Alexander Mackenzie’s later administrative history records cotton cultivation in discussions of the hill communities of the region (Mackenzie 1884, 538). H. F. Samman’s survey of cotton fabrics in Assam further documents the cultivation, processing, spinning, and weaving of cotton within the wider regional textile economy (Samman 1897). Taken together, these sources suggest that cotton connected household production with wider networks of tribute and exchange. Such colonial accounts, however, must be read critically, since Indigenous technologies were frequently interpreted through nineteenth-century evolutionary assumptions concerning supposedly “primitive” and “advanced” forms of production.

Within Karbi households, the production process for cloth from raw cotton involved an extended series of operations including cultivation, harvest, ginning, spinning, dyeing, warping, and weaving. Women were proficient in all stages of this process, relying on observational learning and practice in performing textile crafts. Karbi weaving tradition is inherently connected with women’s productive labour and expertise. According to Karbi oral traditions, Kami, Kaphi, and Serdihun are portrayed as accomplished weavers and textile specialists. These myths cannot simply be understood as stories about technological innovation; rather, they should be seen as collective cultural memories related to the beginnings, ownership, and inheritance of textile craftsmanship. Oral tradition and cultural memory play important roles in the reconstruction of Karbi history. Teron’s studies demonstrate the significance of community narratives, myths, and memories for understanding the Karbi past (Teron 2008; Teron 2011), while Dhanaraju and Hansepi draw attention to dimensions of Karbi history that remain inadequately represented in conventional documentary archives (Dhanaraju and Hansepi 2019, 2748–2759). The growing scholarship on Karbi history has further widened this field by bringing together diverse perspectives on Karbi society, culture, identity, and historical experience (Dhanaraju and Teron 2020).

There is a growing body of scholarship that provides theoretical and empirical foundations for the study of Karbi textiles. Guite examines the socio-cultural significance of tribal costumes and crafts (Guite 2010), while Karolia and Ladia document the traditional textiles and costumes of the Karbi and Biate communities (Karolia and Ladia 2012, 309–316). Their study, however, focuses on these communities in Meghalaya, and its geographical scope therefore differs from the present study of Karbi textile traditions in Assam. Bhattacharjee draws attention to women’s participation in textile production and the textile economy (Bhattacharjee 2014), while Oinam examines handloom production and marketing practices in Northeast India (Oinam 2015). More specifically, Teron and Borthakur document Karbi textile motifs, weaving techniques, and the relationship between textile designs and the surrounding biological and material world (Teron and Borthakur 2012, 305–308). In a separate study, they examine Indigenous knowledge of herbal dyes and the cultural significance of colours among the Karbis, including the changing use of traditional dyeing practices (Teron and Borthakur 2012, 602). Publications such as *Karbi Studies*, *Karbi Textiles: Tradition and Trends*, and *Tirim Amo: A Handcrafted Legacy of the Karbis* further document clothing forms, weaving terminology, loom technologies, dye materials, and textile practices from Karbi cultural and community perspectives (Teron 2008; Teron 2011; Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council 2022; Teron et al. 2023).

There are several limitations within the historiography of Karbi textiles. Although considerable information exists on Karbi costumes, textile patterns, dyes, techniques, and cultural meanings, relatively few historical studies have examined the relationships between cotton cultivation, women’s labour, household production, Indigenous technology, colonial interaction, missionary activity, and changing material practices. Chronologically, this paper focuses on the period from the early nineteenth century to the present. The 1830s provide a useful documentary point of departure, as written colonial accounts begin to offer evidence for situating Karbi textile production and cotton-based economies within wider historical processes. This chronological framework does not suggest that Karbi textile traditions originated in the nineteenth century; rather, it reflects the limits of the available written historical record, which is supplemented here by oral traditions and ethnographic evidence. The paper traces transformations under colonial rule and through the postcolonial and contemporary periods, examining changes in the organisation of textile production, innovations emerging through economic and cultural interaction, and the persistence of textile knowledge amid technological and social change. It argues that the history of Karbi textiles is best understood as one of continuity through transformation, rather than as a linear progression from “tradition” to “modernity.”

Sources and methodology

This study combines historical research with qualitative fieldwork undertaken as part of an ICSSR-funded research project during 2025–2026. Fieldwork was conducted between February and April 2026 across rural and urban locations in Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts of Assam, including Dokmoka,

Diphu, Rongjangphong, Manja, Arnam Langpi, Tarabasa, Chapong, Deopani, Lakhijan, Ji-Langso, Den Arong, Volongkom Aji, Hamren, Jengkha, Umswai, and the Karbi Cultural Society at Taralangso, Diphu. A total of 65 Karbi participants were purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge and experience of textile production and associated cultural practices. They included traditional weavers, craftspeople, textile entrepreneurs, teachers, and knowledge keepers from different age groups, including independent practitioners as well as those associated with cooperatives and cultural organisations.

The interviews were conducted primarily in the Karbi language, enabling participants to describe weaving techniques, textile terminology, oral traditions, processes of learning, and experiences of change through culturally meaningful categories and expressions. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Particular attention was given to the knowledge of weavers and elders concerning cotton preparation, spinning, natural dyeing, loom technology, designs, dress practices, and the intergenerational transmission of textile knowledge. Interview testimony and field observations were analysed alongside colonial accounts, ethnographic writings, government records, published scholarship, and community-based publications. Oral accounts were not treated as direct survivals of an unchanged past; rather, they were critically compared with documentary and ethnographic evidence to reconstruct historical continuities and transformations in Karbi textile practices. This triangulation allows the paper to understand Karbi textile history as a process of continuity through transformation, rather than as a linear movement from “traditional” to “modern” textile practices.

Indigenous Memories and the Origins of Karbi Weaving

A definitive historical date for the origins of weaving among the Karbis cannot be established from the available documentary record, making any precise dating of its emergence conjectural. Karbi oral traditions, however, preserve important memories concerning the origins and transmission of textile knowledge. Accounts of Kami and Kaphi associate weaving particularly with women, while Serdihun is remembered for her contribution to creative design. Oral traditions also recall connections between female ancestors and knowledge of cotton, spinning, and textile production. Although such narratives cannot provide definitive chronological evidence for the origins of weaving, they remain historically significant because they reveal how the Karbis remember and interpret the origins, ownership, and cultural value of textile knowledge (Teron 2008). These recollections also illuminate the gendered organisation of textile production. Women’s textile labour was not confined to operating the loom but extended across multiple stages of production, including preparation of raw materials, spinning, dyeing, weaving, and garment making. Textile knowledge was transmitted largely through intergenerational processes of observation, participation, and practice, making women important bearers of both technical expertise and cultural knowledge. The continuing importance of women in Karbi textile production was also evident during fieldwork, which included interviews with practising women weavers such as Talon Tokbipi of Dokmoka, Karbi Anglong (Tokbipi 2026). Her participation in this study provides contemporary field-based evidence for the continuing presence of women within Karbi weaving practices. More broadly, studies of Karbi oral traditions have demonstrated the importance of women as custodians and transmitters of culturally embedded historical knowledge (Hansepi, Bijeta, and Dhanaraju 2023–2024, 35–50).

The relationship between oral memory and technological practice raises important methodological questions for historical research. Written and oral sources capture different dimensions of historical experience and therefore require different but complementary modes of interpretation. Colonial administrators tended to document material objects and observable practices, including cotton cultivation, spinning implements, looms, garments, and cloth production. Karbi oral accounts, by contrast, locate technological knowledge within social relationships connecting living practitioners, earlier generations, and remembered ancestors. These sources therefore provide different perspectives on the history of textile knowledge. Oral traditions should neither be treated simply as folklore nor used as substitutes for documentary chronology. Rather, when analysed alongside historical records and continuing practices, they reveal how the history of Karbi weaving encompasses both material technologies and culturally transmitted memories.

Cotton, Women and the Household Textile Economy

Historically, cotton cultivation and textile production formed important components of the Karbi household economy. Textile production was closely connected with agriculture, as locally cultivated cotton passed through a sequence of household processes before it became cloth. These included harvesting, seed removal, fibre preparation, and spinning, dyeing, warping, and weaving. Cloth was therefore not simply the product of weaving at the loom but the outcome of an extended chain of labour that connected agricultural production with technical knowledge and household organisation.

Cotton also circulated beyond the households in which it was produced. Nineteenth-century accounts provide evidence for locating Karbi cotton production within wider systems of tribute and regional exchange. Butler records tributary relations involving the Karbis, while Mackenzie situates the Mikirs within

broad political and economic relations of the hill communities of the region (Butler 1855, 127; Mackenzie 1884, 213–216). Such evidence suggests that cotton had significance both as a household resource and as a commodity circulating through wider economic and social networks. It supplied material for domestic textile production while also participating in relations of exchange beyond the household. Household textile production should therefore not be understood as an isolated activity, since cotton and textiles were embedded in networks of consumption, gift-giving, tribute, and regional exchange. Textiles were also incorporated into social relationships associated with kinship, marriage, and customary practices.

Women occupied a central position within this material economy. Textile production required mastery of several specialised techniques, and its association with women's labour should not obscure its technological and intellectual complexity. Women participated in transforming agricultural raw materials into textiles and retained much of the practical knowledge required across different stages of production. Cotton seeds were removed using the *mithongrang*, while the *takiri* was used in the process of spinning fibre into yarn. These activities required manual dexterity, bodily coordination, and knowledge of the material properties of cotton. Expertise in weaving therefore rested upon a wider body of technical knowledge extending well beyond the operation of the loom itself.

Women's textile labour also connected material production with social reproduction. Textile skills were transmitted across generations within households through observation, participation, and practice, while the textiles produced through this knowledge circulated through everyday dress, marriage, ritual, and exchange. Textile production consequently contributed not only to the material requirements of the household but also to the reproduction of familial and social relationships. Its historical significance cannot therefore be measured solely in terms of market value. Household textile production provided a degree of material self-reliance while sustaining culturally significant practices associated with clothing, exchange, and social life. Examining this labour brings into view forms of women's technical expertise and knowledge that remain inadequately represented in conventional documentary and political histories.

The increasing availability of commercially produced yarn and synthetic dyes gradually altered this organisation of labour. Households using commercial yarn no longer needed to undertake every stage of cotton cultivation, seed removal, fibre preparation, and spinning, while synthetic dyes reduced dependence on the labour-intensive collection and preparation of natural dye materials. These changes should be understood neither simply as technological improvements nor solely as cultural loss. Rather, they reorganised the relationship between labour, materials, and knowledge within textile production. Weaving could continue even as some of the agricultural, spinning, and dyeing practices historically associated with it became less central to household production. This separation of weaving from some of its earlier preparatory processes represents an important example of the continuity through transformation that characterises the history of Karbi textiles.

Indigenous Textile Technology and Natural Dyeing

Karbi textile production developed through a close relationship between locally available materials, embodied skill, and specialised technical knowledge. Weaving traditionally employs the *kachivur atherang*, or backstrap loom, constructed primarily from materials such as bamboo, wood, cane, and rope. Its principal components include the *therang* (loom bar), *thening* (shed rod), *thelangpong* (heddle rod), *barlim* (pattern sticks), *ingthi* (reed or comb), *hi'i* (heddle), *harpi* (wooden batten), and *thehu* (backstrap). The specialised terminology associated with these components itself reflects the technical knowledge embedded in Karbi weaving tradition. Unlike a fixed-frame loom, the *kachivur atherang* depends upon the weaver's body to create and regulate the tension necessary for weaving. Changes in bodily position therefore affect warp tension, requiring coordination between posture, thread manipulation, and the movement of loom components throughout the weaving process. Although the loom may appear technologically simple when compared with mechanised or industrial looms, its operation requires considerable practical knowledge and bodily skill. Its technological character lies not only in its physical structure but also in the embodied knowledge through which the weaver activates and sustains its function. Fieldwork conducted among Karbi women weavers further demonstrates the continuing importance of women in the practice and transmission of textile knowledge. Maina Engtipi, a weaver associated with the Karbi Cultural Society at Taralangso, Diphu, was among the practising weavers interviewed during the study (Engtipi 2026).

The technical vocabulary extends beyond the components of the loom to the threads, implements, and techniques involved in textile production. *Arank* denotes the warp, while *atuk* refers to the weft, and *jokasu*, a porcupine quill or spine, may be employed in working ornamental designs. Teron and Borthakur further identify *kerip*, *ketur*, *keran*, *kehom*, *keroi*, *kepharlem*, and *kethak* as distinct Indigenous techniques employed in Karbi weaving and the production of textile designs (Teron and Borthakur 2012, 305). Such terminology demonstrates that Karbi weaving constitutes a specialised body of technical knowledge rather than an undifferentiated form of so-called "traditional weaving."

This understanding of textile technology also challenges evolutionary approaches that evaluate Indigenous technologies primarily in relation to mechanisation, scale, or industrial productivity. Backstrap looms, for instance, can easily be characterised as technologically less advanced than larger frame looms or mechanised looms because of their relatively simple material construction. Such a comparison, however, overlooks the embodied knowledge required to regulate tension, manipulate threads, select and reproduce designs, and coordinate bodily movement with the material properties of the loom. Ingold's understanding of making as a process of skilled engagement between people and materials is particularly useful in this context (Ingold 2013). From this perspective, Karbi weaving technology cannot be understood solely through the physical complexity of the loom; it must also be approached through the practical knowledge and embodied skills that make textile production possible.

Natural dyeing constituted another important dimension of Karbi textile technology. Dyes were obtained from plant, animal, and mineral sources, and their preparation required specialised knowledge of materials and processing techniques. Producing particular shades involved identifying appropriate dye sources, selecting suitable plant parts or other materials, and applying processes that could include pounding, boiling, fermentation, alkaline treatment, immersion, drying, and repeated dyeing. Different materials and combinations produced shades of blue or indigo, red, yellow, and black. Dyeing therefore involved considerably more than extracting colour from locally available materials; it depended upon accumulated knowledge of ecological resources, their material properties, and appropriate methods and timing of preparation.

Karbi dye knowledge was also organised through a distinctive colour vocabulary. The general Karbi terms for colour include *alir* and *acham*, while specific terms distinguish important colour categories: *a'kelok* denotes white, *a'ke'er* red, *a'kelir* blue or green, and *a'ke'et* yellow (Teron 2022, 262). The use of *a'kelir* for both blue and green is particularly noteworthy because it indicates that Karbi colour categories need not correspond precisely to English colour classifications. Colour terminology thus formed part of the wider knowledge system through which textile materials were identified, differentiated, and culturally understood. Some of the principal dye sources associated with Karbi textile production are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected Natural Dye Sources and Karbi Colour Terms

Karbi dye source	Scientific name	Part used	Colour	Karbi colour term
<i>Sibu, bujir</i>	<i>Marsdenia tinctoria</i> R. Br.	Leaves	Indigo/blue	<i>a'kelir</i>
<i>Burot, buthe</i>	<i>Strobilanthes cusia</i> (Nees) Kuntze	Leaves	Indigo/blue	<i>a'kelir</i>
<i>Duli, duri</i>	<i>Indigofera tinctoria</i> L.	Leaves and flower buds	Indigo/blue	<i>a'kelir</i>
<i>Tarlong</i>	<i>Morinda angustifolia</i> Roxb.	Roots	Yellow	<i>a'ke'et</i>
<i>Laha</i>	<i>Kerria lacca</i> Kerr	Lac insect	Red	<i>a'ke'er</i>

Sources: Teron, *Nothengpi*, 262–264; Teron and Borthakur, “Traditional Knowledge on Herbal Dyes,” 595–597.

Among these dye materials, *sibu* occupied a particularly important place in Karbi textile production. Teron and Borthakur identify *Marsdenia tinctoria* as the principal traditional source of the indigo dye known as *sibu*. However, the category is broader than a simple one-to-one correspondence between a Karbi term and a botanical species. They observe that *Marsdenia tinctoria*, *Strobilanthes cusia*, and *Indigofera tinctoria* may collectively be referred to as *sibu* because all three produce indigo dye, although *M. tinctoria* is most commonly identified by that name (Teron and Borthakur 2012, 596–597). *Nothengpi* similarly records different varieties associated with *sibu*, including *bujir*, *burot*, *buthe*, and *duli*, and describes *bujir* and *duli* as among the commonly used varieties. This variation suggests that *sibu* is better understood as an Indigenous dye category encompassing related dye-producing plants rather than a term corresponding to a single botanical species. The knowledge recorded in *Nothengpi* further associates the harvesting of *sibu* with seasonal timing and women's expertise, indicating that dye production involved knowledge not only of plant materials but also of appropriate periods of collection and processing (Teron 2022, 264).

The preparation of *sibu* further demonstrates the complexity of this knowledge. Leaves were collected, pounded, allowed to decompose, and subsequently combined with an alkaline solution before yarn or cloth was repeatedly immersed until the desired colour was obtained. *Nothengpi* describes the use of a wooden mortar, leaves spread on a bamboo mat during decomposition, and *phelo*, an alkaline solution prepared from ash, as components of the process (Teron 2022, 264). These procedures indicate that natural dyeing brought together knowledge of plants, fermentation, alkaline substances, material preparation, and repeated observation of colour development. Dyeing was therefore not an isolated technical operation but part of a broader ecological and material knowledge system maintained substantially through women's textile labour.

The historical transformation of this knowledge becomes particularly visible with the growing availability of synthetic dyes and commercially dyed yarn. Such materials reduced the need for labour-intensive

processes of collecting, preparing, fermenting, and repeatedly treating natural dye materials. Teron and Borthakur observe that inexpensive chemically dyed yarn and declining interest among younger generations have contributed to the erosion of traditional herbal-dye knowledge among the Karbis (Teron and Borthakur 2012, 602). This transformation should not be understood simply as the replacement of “traditional” dyes by “modern” ones; what changed was also the relationship between textile production, women’s labour, locally available ecological resources, and the intergenerational transmission of specialised knowledge. The persistence of knowledge concerning *sibu* and other natural dyes, even where their everyday use has diminished, therefore illustrates the broader pattern of continuity through transformation that characterises Karbi textile history.

Colonial economy, knowledge and changing dress

The incorporation of the Mikir Hills into colonial administrative structures altered the political and economic context within which cotton, textiles, and other commodities circulated. Colonial administrative accounts increasingly documented the population, agriculture, resources, communications, and economic activities of the region. Allen’s *Assam District Gazetteers: Nowgong* provides an important early twentieth-century administrative account of the Mikir Hills within this wider colonial framework (Allen 1905). Such documentation makes it possible to situate Karbi textile production within changing relationships between hill communities, administrative centres, markets, and the plains. At the same time, colonial intervention did not introduce exchange into an otherwise isolated economy; rather, it reorganised pre-existing networks of tribute and exchange through new administrative structures, markets, and forms of governance.

British interest in cotton and other fibres formed part of a wider colonial concern with documenting and assessing economically valuable resources and forms of textile production. Samman’s *Monograph on the Cotton Fabrics of Assam* reflects the colonial administrative impulse to document and classify regional textile production, including processes of spinning and weaving, weaving technologies, threads, and forms of clothing (Samman 1897). Such documentation is significant for Karbi history because it situates household textile production within a wider colonial economy increasingly concerned with identifying, classifying, and assessing local resources and industries. However, colonial documentation poses certain methodological issues. Administrators, missionaries, and ethnographers documented the garments, cotton production, and technologies they encountered, but interpreted Indigenous objects within intellectual traditions that categorised societies hierarchically based on perceived levels of civilisation. Local inventions and innovations in household technology were often interpreted as signs of simplicity rather than as adaptations to specific material and environmental conditions.

Colonial documentation privileged tangible objects over the knowledge that produced them. Machinery could be described technically and textiles classified aesthetically; however, such documentation seldom encompassed the decades of skill involved in becoming accomplished weavers, Indigenous classifications of technologies, or the intergenerational transmission of textile knowledge. Engaging with colonial sources alongside oral accounts and Karbi-centric documentation produces alternative interpretations. Rather than evaluating the technical sophistication of the Karbi loom according to external standards, the question becomes how this technology functioned effectively within household production systems.

Missionary activity introduced another institutional context within which Karbi social and cultural life encountered colonial modernity. From the late nineteenth century, Christian missions established educational initiatives among the Karbis, and missionary schools gradually created new spaces of literacy and formal learning (Katharpi and Dhanaraju 2021, 737–742). Missionary education also introduced forms of instruction that differed from predominantly household- and community-based transmission of knowledge. In the history of textile practices, however, these developments should not be interpreted as producing a straightforward replacement of Karbi dress by Western clothing. Changes in dress occurred through wider processes of education, regional cultural interaction, market expansion, and selective adoption. Early twentieth-century descriptions of *Mikir* dress already reveal borrowing and adaptation from neighbouring communities, particularly the Khasis, demonstrating that clothing practices were historically shaped by regional cultural interaction as well as colonial encounters (Stack and Lyall 1908). In the postcolonial period, educational institutions themselves could become sites for the renewed assertion of Karbi identity. Community accounts recall Karbi students wearing traditional attire to schools in the early 1970s despite institutional reluctance (Teron 2022, 257).

The history of Karbi dress therefore suggests a complex process of selective adoption, regional interaction, and cultural reassertion rather than a linear transition from Indigenous to Western clothing. Different forms of clothing acquired significance within different social contexts, including educational institutions, marriage ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and everyday community life. The expansion of colonial and postcolonial modernity introduced new materials, garments, and contexts of dress without entirely displacing existing practices. Karbi dress practices consequently developed through processes of selective adoption, adaptation, and cultural continuity.

From Household Production to Contemporary Handloom

Karbi textile production has undergone significant technological and social transformations over time. This paper interprets these changes not simply as technological innovations but as historical processes in which continuity and transformation occurred together. One of the most significant changes concerned the relationship between cotton cultivation and household weaving. Historically, textile production connected the cultivation and harvesting of cotton with fibre preparation, ginning, spinning, dyeing, and weaving. With the increasing availability of commercially produced yarn, however, weaving no longer depended upon households cultivating and processing their own cotton. The labour of weaving could therefore continue even as it became increasingly separated from some of the agricultural and preparatory processes with which it had previously been associated.

Commercial yarns offered practical advantages that encouraged their adoption. Their ready availability reduced the labour required for processing raw cotton and spinning fibre into yarn, while synthetic dyes reduced dependence on the collection and preparation of natural dye materials. These changes did not affect all weavers uniformly or occur at the same pace. Their adoption depended upon factors such as access to markets, availability of materials, labour requirements, and changing patterns of knowledge transmission. Manual spinning of cotton required specialised knowledge that became less necessary when commercially produced yarn was readily available; similarly, the adoption of synthetic dyes reduced the everyday need for knowledge associated with collecting and preparing natural dye materials. Technological change therefore altered not only the materials used in textile production but also the kinds of skills and knowledge required to sustain it. The contemporary relationship between weaving, livelihood, and changing forms of textile production was also reflected in the fieldwork, which included practising weavers engaged in entrepreneurial activity. Monju Tissopi, a weaver and entrepreneur from Richohidi, Volongkom Aji, Karbi Anglong, represents this contemporary intersection between textile practice and emerging forms of economic activity. (Tissopi 2026)

It is important in this context to distinguish continuity from the preservation of every element of an earlier system of production. Karbi textile traditions have persisted despite changes in their materials, techniques, and organisation of labour. Commercial yarn can be incorporated into textiles woven through inherited techniques, allowing weaving practices and recognisable forms of Karbi dress to continue even when the raw materials and preparatory processes have changed. At the same time, different components of textile knowledge have not persisted equally. Weaving may remain widely practised while specialised knowledge associated with cotton processing, spinning, or natural dyeing becomes less common. Continuity therefore does not require technological or material uniformity across time.

These transformations have also affected the social and cultural meanings attached to Karbi textiles. The increasing availability of commercially manufactured and ready-made clothing reduced dependence on household weaving for everyday clothing. Yet this did not necessarily diminish the cultural significance of Karbi textiles. Handwoven garments continue to acquire particular importance in weddings, festivals, ritual occasions, and public expressions of Karbi identity. The changing history of textile use therefore suggests a shift in context: textiles that were once closely integrated into everyday household production and dress can acquire heightened symbolic significance in ceremonial and representational settings. Their historical importance consequently cannot be assessed solely through the frequency of everyday use.

Contemporary documentation has also created new channels for transmitting Karbi textile knowledge beyond household instruction. Publications such as *Karbi Textiles: Tradition and Trends* and *Tirim Amo: A Handcrafted Legacy of the Karbis*, produced through institutions of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, document garments, weaving practices, designs, and textile terminology. (Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council 2022; Teron et al. 2023) Rather than replacing intergenerational learning, such documentation extends the spaces in which textile knowledge can be recorded, circulated, and presented as part of Karbi cultural heritage.

These developments should not be interpreted through a rigid opposition between authenticity and commodification. Karbi textiles historically participated in networks of exchange, while weaving practices have continually adapted to changing materials and social circumstances. The incorporation of commercial yarns, synthetic dyes, and new contexts of production does not in itself signify the disappearance of textile tradition. Rather, these changes demonstrate how Karbi textile practices have been reworked within changing economic and technological conditions while retaining their cultural significance. Contemporary handloom production can therefore be understood as another phase in the longer history of continuity through transformation.

Discussion: Continuity through Transformation

The history of Karbi textiles illustrates why material practices need to be understood as historically evolving processes rather than as culturally static traditions. Karbi textile production historically connected cotton cultivation and harvesting with fibre preparation, spinning, natural dyeing, weaving on backstrap looms, and the

circulation of textiles through social networks. These activities formed an interconnected chain of labour through which agricultural raw materials were transformed into finished textiles that circulated within households and through kinship, ceremonial, and exchange relations.

Colonialism altered the political and economic contexts within which these material practices operated, but it did not produce a complete break with earlier systems. Colonial administration brought Karbi-inhabited areas into new structures of governance and documentation, while expanding markets and regional interactions created wider access to new materials and forms of dress. Missionary education introduced additional institutional spaces in which cultural practices and identities were negotiated. At the same time, evidence of earlier tribute and exchange relations demonstrates that Karbi communities were already connected to wider networks before colonial rule. Colonialism should therefore be understood as reorganising and extending existing relationships rather than introducing exchange into an otherwise isolated Indigenous economy.

Gender provides a particularly important perspective on these transformations. Women's participation in textile production extended beyond weaving finished cloth to multiple stages of cotton preparation, spinning, dyeing, and weaving. Changes in materials and production processes consequently affected not only the organisation of labour but also the transmission of gendered technical knowledge. The increasing availability of commercial yarn, for example, reduced the need for household spinning, while synthetic dyes reduced dependence on specialised knowledge of natural dye materials and their preparation. Technological change could therefore enable the continuation of weaving while simultaneously reducing the everyday transmission of particular forms of knowledge associated with earlier stages of textile production.

The persistence of backstrap-loom weaving provides a further illustration of continuity through transformation. The continued use of the *kachivur atherang* should not be interpreted as evidence of technological stagnation. Its portability, use of locally available materials, specialised technical vocabulary, and dependence upon embodied skill have enabled it to remain effective under changing material conditions. Commercial yarns and synthetic dyes can be incorporated into textiles produced through inherited weaving techniques. The persistence of the loom therefore demonstrates how an Indigenous technology can remain viable even when some of the materials and processes associated with its use change.

Transformation is also evident in the changing relationship between textiles and Karbi identity. Historically, household weaving provided cloth for everyday as well as social and ceremonial use. With the increasing availability of commercially manufactured and ready-made clothing, dependence on handwoven textiles for everyday dress has declined. Yet Karbi textiles continue to hold particular significance in weddings, festivals, rituals, and public expressions of community identity. A decline in everyday functional use, therefore, does not necessarily imply a corresponding decline in cultural significance; in particular contexts, handwoven textiles may acquire heightened symbolic importance precisely as markers of Karbi identity and heritage.

The history of Karbi textiles is consequently characterised by the coexistence of practices associated with different historical moments. Natural and synthetic dyes may coexist, commercial yarns may be woven on backstrap looms, and Karbi garments may be worn alongside commercially produced clothing. Historical change, therefore, does not require the complete disappearance of earlier practices. Rather, inherited techniques, new materials, changing forms of labour, and contemporary expressions of identity can coexist and interact. Transformation, rather than either complete continuity or total rupture, thus provides a more appropriate framework for understanding the historical development of Karbi textile traditions.

Conclusion

The history of Karbi textiles encompasses considerably more than changes in garments, colours, and patterns. Textile production historically formed part of an interconnected material system involving cotton cultivation, household labour, fibre preparation, spinning, natural dyeing, Indigenous weaving technologies, and the circulation and use of cloth. These practices connected household production with wider social and economic relationships, including exchange, kinship, and marriage, ritual, and community life. Examining textiles historically therefore provides an important perspective on the economic, technological, social, and cultural histories of the Karbis.

Women occupied a central position within this textile economy. Karbi oral traditions associate women with the origins and creative development of weaving, while historical and ethnographic evidence demonstrates the importance of women's knowledge in different stages of textile production. Transforming raw cotton into finished cloth required specialised skills acquired and transmitted through observation, participation, and practice across generations. Textile history consequently brings into view forms of women's labour, technical expertise, and knowledge that remain inadequately represented in conventional documentary archives.

Colonial rule, market expansion, missionary education, and wider regional interactions altered the political, economic, and material contexts within which Karbi textile practices operated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These transformations, however, did not represent the incorporation of an otherwise isolated textile economy into networks of exchange. Karbi communities were already connected to wider relationships of tribute and regional exchange before and during the expansion of colonial rule. Over time, greater access to commercially produced yarns, synthetic dyes, and manufactured clothing changed the organisation of household textile production. Commercial yarn reduced dependence on domestic cotton processing and spinning, while synthetic dyes reduced the everyday use of some forms of natural-dye knowledge. Such changes transformed particular forms of labour and technical knowledge while simultaneously enabling weaving to continue under changing socioeconomic conditions.

Karbi textile history therefore cannot be adequately understood through a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Different components of textile production changed at different rates: inherited weaving techniques could coexist with commercial yarns, synthetic dyes, new garments, and changing market relations. At the same time, the decreasing dependence on handwoven cloth for everyday clothing did not necessarily diminish its cultural significance. Karbi textiles continue to occupy important places in weddings, festivals, rituals, and public expressions of community identity. Their history demonstrates that continuity does not require the unchanged preservation of every material, technique, or practice.

The history of Karbi weaving ultimately illustrates a broader process of continuity through transformation. The relationships among cotton cultivation, household production, women's labour, Indigenous technological knowledge, and textile use have been repeatedly reconfigured under changing historical circumstances. Yet backstrap-loom weaving, textile knowledge, cultural memory, and the social significance of Karbi handloom traditions have continued in adapted forms. Karbi textiles should therefore be understood neither as static survivals of an unchanging past nor simply as products transformed by modernisation, but as historically dynamic material practices through which knowledge, identity, and cultural meaning continue to be produced and negotiated.

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Author Contribution

R. K. Bijeta is the sole author of this article and was responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, research design, collection and analysis of materials, interpretation of the findings, and preparation and revision of the manuscript.

Data Availability

The study draws upon historical documents, published and community-based sources, oral traditions, and qualitative field-based materials collected during the research. Published and archival sources used in the study are identified in the manuscript and references. Field-based qualitative materials are not publicly deposited because they include community knowledge and oral accounts collected in specific research contexts.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Statement

The research involved qualitative fieldwork and interactions with Karbi community members, traditional weavers, elders, and cultural practitioners. The research was conducted in accordance with appropriate academic and ethical principles concerning informed participation, respect for community knowledge, cultural sensitivity, confidentiality, and responsible representation of oral and Indigenous knowledge.

Declaration of Originality

The author declares that the manuscript is an original work, has not been published previously, and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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