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Navigating tradition and modernity: socio-emotional development among Karbi tribal youth in North East India

Serlika Kramsapi

Independent Researcher, Abhayapuri, Assam

*Corresponding author *E-mail address:* serlikakramsapi7@gmail.com

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Abstract

The intersection of tradition and modernity presents a profound psychosocial dynamic for indigenous youth globally, and this friction is acutely pronounced in the North Eastern region of India. This paper examines the socio-emotional development of Karbi tribal youth as they navigate the dichotomous pressures of ancestral indigenous frameworks and contemporary globalized modernity. Drawing upon sociological, psychological, and anthropological perspectives, this study investigates how modernization, digital expansion, formal education, and shifting economic landscapes impact identity formation, emotional regulation, and social connectivity among Karbi adolescents and young adults. Furthermore, the paper explores the mediating roles of traditional institutions—such as the *Tradition of the Club* (Hacha Kekan, *Nimso Kerung etc.*) and customary governance systems—in buffering psychological distress and fostering resilience. Ultimately, this research argues for a nuanced understanding of youth development that transcends binary conceptualizations of tradition versus modernity, advocating instead for a syncretic model of identity negotiation.

Keywords: Karbi tribe, North East India, socio-emotional development, identity formation, modernity, indigenous youth

1. Introduction

The Northeast of India—a rugged, geographically isolated frontier characterized by breathtaking topography and profound ethno-cultural heterogeneity—is currently undergoing an accelerated phase of socio-cultural transformation. At the pulsing heart of this transition are indigenous youth, who find themselves standing at a precarious crossroad between deeply entrenched ancestral traditions and the relentless, homogenizing push of global modernity. Among the most prominent indigenous communities navigating this shifting landscape are the Karbis, predominantly indigenous to the lush hills of the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam, with diaspora populations residing in Meghalaya,

Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland. For these young people, the journey from childhood to adulthood is no longer guided solely by the time-tested wisdom of village elders and indigenous institutions; rather, it is continuously mediated by the digital panopticon, Westernized educational frameworks, and the pressures of a competitive market economy.

Socio-emotional development during adolescence and early adulthood is universally recognized as a critical, highly sensitive life phase marked by intense identity exploration, the pursuit of autonomy, and the heightened significance of peer affiliation (Arnett, 2014; Erikson, 1968). However, for contemporary Karbi youth, this universal developmental stage is uniquely and complexly complicated by the rapid erosion of traditional socialization structures—such as the *Jirsong* (youth dormitories) and customary community governance systems. As modern schooling, mass media, and consumer capitalism infiltrate the rural hinterlands, a profound cognitive and cultural dissonance emerges. While globalization undeniably offers unprecedented avenues for socio-economic mobility, digital connectivity, and the expansion of personal worldviews, it frequently engenders a paradoxical outcome: severe cultural alienation, widening intergenerational communication gaps, and heightened psychological distress. Understanding how Karbi youth negotiate this delicate psychosocial terrain is not merely an academic exercise, but a vital imperative for comprehending the broader socio-political and mental health landscape of Northeast India in the twenty-first century.

This paper investigates the multifaceted dimensions of socio-emotional development among Karbi tribal youth. By examining the structural shifts in their environment, this study addresses the following central questions: How do Karbi youth negotiate competing cultural paradigms? In what ways do traditional institutions support or hinder contemporary emotional well-being? And how can a balanced socio-emotional framework be conceptualized for indigenous youth navigating a globalized world?

2. Theoretical Framework and Contextual Background

To comprehensively comprehend the socio-emotional trajectory of Karbi youth in contemporary Northeast India, this paper draws upon Erik Erikson's seminal theory of psychosocial development—specifically focusing on the pivotal crisis of identity versus role confusion—and integrates it with Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework posits that human development is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is profoundly influenced by a series of nested environmental systems. These range from the immediate micro-system, comprising family, peer groups, and local schools, to the broader macro-system, which encompasses overarching cultural values, socio-political structures, and the pervasive forces of globalization (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By bridging Erikson's intrapsychic developmental stages with Bronfenbrenner's socio-environmental contexts, we can better understand how modern indigenous youth navigate the labyrinth of personal and collective identity formation.

The traditional Karbi socio-cultural universe is fundamentally communitarian, agrarian, and deeply spiritual. Historically, the socialization of Karbi youth was seamlessly mediated through indigenous institutions, oral traditions, communal agricultural practices (such as *jhum* or shifting cultivation, though contemporary socioeconomic pressures have necessitated a transition toward more sedentary farming models), and customary laws overseen by village elders and traditional rulers. Institutions such as

the *Terank* (traditional youth dormitory systems, though their functional prominence has evolved) and community-centric rituals fostered a strong sense of belonging, collective responsibility, and intergenerational continuity. Within this micro-system, the adolescent's path to adulthood was relatively unproblematic, as social roles, gender expectations, and spiritual worldviews were clearly demarcated and reinforced by the community.

However, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed an unprecedented intrusion of the macro-system of global modernity into the traditional Karbi micro-system. Factors such as the rapid proliferation of high-speed mobile internet, integration into the competitive Indian mainstream educational curriculum, migration to metropolitan urban centers like Guwahati, Shillong, and Delhi, and pervasive exposure to global consumer capitalism have fundamentally altered the socialization landscape. The youth are no longer shielded within the confines of agrarian homogeneity. Instead, they are bombarded with heterogeneous values, digital media representations, and secularized worldviews that frequently challenge indigenous norms.

Consequently, contemporary Karbi youth find themselves ensnared in Erikson's classic crisis of identity versus role confusion. During adolescence and early adulthood, individuals are tasked with synthesizing past experiences with future expectations to form a coherent sense of self. For the Karbi youth, this process is fraught with tension. They must perform a delicate balancing act: maintaining cultural authenticity and adhering to communitarian expectations to satisfy familial and tribal obligations, while simultaneously acquiring the modern, individualistic competencies required for economic survival in a globalized economy. This dual pressure often manifests as cognitive dissonance, alienation, or psychological distress, as the youth attempt to reconcile the collective ethos of their ancestors with the hyper-individualistic demands of 21st-century capitalism. Ultimately, understanding this dynamic requires acknowledging that the modern Karbi youth are not merely passive recipients of globalization, but active agents negotiating a complex, multi-layered socio-ecological reality.

3. Identity Formation and the Modernity Dilemma

Identity formation is universally recognized as the cornerstone of socio-emotional development during adolescence and early adulthood (Erikson, 1968). However, for indigenous and tribal youth living in post-colonial nation-states, this psychological process is profoundly complicated by historical trajectories of marginalization, the ongoing politics of recognition, and systemic pressures toward cultural assimilation (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). Among the Karbi community of Northeast India, the transition from childhood to adulthood occurs at the intersection of traditional community structures and modern state apparatuses. The following sections provide an in-depth academic examination of the structural and psychosocial factors disrupting identity formation among contemporary Karbi youth.

3.1. The Erosion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Internalized Alienation

Historically, the self-concept and psychosocial identity of the Karbi people were structurally anchored in robust kinship networks, defined clan lineages known as *Kur*, and a rich transmission of oral traditions (Tisso, 2018). In this traditional framework, youth acquired their socio-emotional grounding through active, participatory roles in community rituals and agrarian ceremonies—most notably the *Rongker* (post-harvest

festival) and *Chomangkan* (a funeral festival). These cultural practices functioned as psychological anchors, offering individuals a collective emotional security blanket and an unambiguous, proud sense of communal belonging (Teron, 2015).

In contemporary times, however, the expansion of state-sponsored formal schooling has systematically marginalized indigenous pedagogies. Although education is conventionally understood as a vital vehicle for socioeconomic mobility and empowerment, mainstream curricula—particularly within the post-colonial Indian educational framework—frequently omit local histories, indigenous epistemologies, and localized ecological wisdom (Kumar, 2014). Consequently, Karbi youth are subjected to a profound cognitive dissonance. They must constantly navigate the schism between the knowledge systems validated by institutional authorities (which are predominantly urban, Westernized, and academic) and the epistemologies prized by their village elders (which are spiritual, localized, and oral) (Nongbri, 2003).

This systemic devaluation of indigenous heritage often engenders feelings of inferiority among the younger generation regarding their ancestral roots. This phenomenon aligns closely with Frantz Fanon's (1967) seminal theoretical formulation of internalized cultural alienation, wherein colonized or marginalized subjects unconsciously adopt the cultural standards of the dominant society, viewing their own heritage as backward, irrelevant, or shameful.

3.2. Linguistic Shifts, Communication Gaps, and Psychological Distress

Language serves as a fundamental vessel for cultural identity, worldview construction, and nuanced emotional expression (Sapir, 1929). The Karbi language (*Karbi Alam*) contains intricate vocabularies and emotional lexicons that capture the community's intimate, symbiotic relationship with the natural environment and ancestral spirits (Baruah, 2020). Nevertheless, the socio-economic dominance of regional and global languages—specifically English and Assamese—within formal education, institutional employment, mass media, and rural-to-urban migration pathways has catalyzed a rapid linguistic shift among younger Karbis (Saikia, 2017).

As a direct consequence, many urbanized Karbi youth display declining levels of proficiency in their mother tongue. This linguistic erosion inadvertently establishes an intergenerational communicative barrier, obstructing the seamless transfer of cultural wisdom and emotional wisdom from elders to youth. This communicative distance frequently deteriorates into profound emotional alienation, undermining the protective functions of familial and community mentorship precisely when adolescents face heightened identity crises and socio-emotional vulnerabilities (Phungcho, 2021).

The psychological implications of this linguistic and cultural disconnection are severe. As substantiated by Tuisku et al. (2019) in comparative global research on indigenous youth populations, the erosion of native language proficiency is empirically linked to diminished personal self-esteem, fractured self-identity, and elevated incidences of anxiety and psychological distress. For Karbi youth, reclaiming socio-emotional well-being necessitates not only economic development but also the deliberate revitalization of their linguistic and cultural heritage within institutional spaces.

4. Socio-Emotional Well-Being: Mental Health, Stress, and Coping

The friction between traditional collectivism and modern individualism generates distinct socio-emotional challenges for Karbi youth, an indigenous ethnic community primarily residing in the hill districts of Assam, Northeast India. As globalization, market economies, and digital connectivity infiltrate rural and semi-urban indigenous spaces, traditional communal paradigms are increasingly challenged by modern atomized worldviews. This cultural transition induces complex psychological dilemmas, identity fragmentation, and behavioral adaptations among the younger generation, who must simultaneously navigate ancestral expectations and contemporary global realities.

4.1. Intergenerational Conflict and the Generational Gap

The rapid pace of modernization has fractured the traditional intergenerational continuum. Historically, knowledge transfer, socialization, and value formation within Karbi society occurred through seamless, vertical integration from elders to youth, anchored in customary laws and oral traditions. However, contemporary socio-cultural shifts have created a profound ideological divide. Elders often view modern youth behaviors—such as individualistic decision-making, changing dress codes, non-traditional courtship, and career choices outside agriculture—as a breakdown of moral fiber and cultural values. Conversely, youth frequently perceive elders as rigid, patriarchal, and out of touch with contemporary socio-economic realities.

This ideological chasm manifests as chronic familial stress and identity renegotiation. When young people attempt to assert autonomy in marriage, career, or lifestyle, they often encounter intense community pressure and accusations of cultural alienation. The resulting tension can precipitate anxiety, depressive symptoms, and behavioral withdrawal. As sociological literature notes, rapid cultural transition often disrupts the "cultural safety net" of indigenous youth, leaving them suspended between two contradictory value systems: the collectivist demand for conformity and the individualistic pursuit of self-actualization (Berry, 1997; Phinney et al., 2001).

4.2. Substance Use and Coping Mechanisms

As in many indigenous communities undergoing rapid transitions, substance use has emerged as a significant public health and socio-emotional concern among Karbi youth. The availability of alcohol, synthetic drugs, and traditional intoxicants serves, in many cases, as a maladaptive coping mechanism for navigating identity crises, academic pressure, underemployment, and the psychological burden of intergenerational conflict (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Substance dependency functions here not merely as a deviant behavior, but as a symptom of deeper structural and emotional distress.

Furthermore, the traditional social controls that regulated substance consumption during specific rituals and communal ceremonies have weakened. In the pre-modern era, indigenous consumption was bounded by strict communal oversight. Today, globalization and commercialization have detached these substances from their ritual contexts, leaving youth vulnerable to peer pressure and commercialized addiction (Nagel, 1996). This phenomenon underscores a critical emotional deficit: when traditional outlets for emotional expression and stress relief—such as community bonding, oral storytelling, youth dormitories, and collective agricultural labor—are replaced by sedentary, isolated lifestyles, alternative, destructive outlets fill the void.

Ultimately, addressing these socio-emotional vulnerabilities requires culturally grounded interventions. Public health policies and social support systems must move beyond punitive measures to incorporate the psychosocial realities of indigenous youth. By fostering spaces that bridge the generational divide and revitalizing positive cultural frameworks, Karbi society can better support its youth in harmonizing the enduring strengths of collectivism with the aspirations of modernity.

5. The Role of Traditional Institutions and Resilience

Despite the profound pressures of modernization, globalization, and socio-political transitions, Karbi traditional structures continue to exhibit remarkable resilience, serving as vital buffers for psychological well-being and socio-emotional development. Within indigenous societies, traditional institutions are not merely relics of the past; rather, they function as dynamic mechanisms that facilitate cultural continuity and emotional stability among the youth.

5.1. Nimso Kerung and Youth Dormitories

Historically, Karbi society relied heavily on indigenous institutions (Terank) for holistic youth socialization and moral instruction. Although formal youth dormitories—comparable to the *Morung* systems of neighboring Naga tribes or the *Zawlbuk* of the Mizos—have evolved or diminished in their physical ubiquity, the underlying ethos of peer-group learning and collective responsibility remains remarkably potent (Teron, 2017). Traditional and informal spaces where Karbi youth gather to share folklore, oral history, music, and communal responsibilities actively foster a profound sense of collective resilience.

Music, in particular, plays an indispensable role in the emotional and psychological life of Karbi youth. Traditional instruments such as the *Muri* (flute) and the *Cheng* (drum), when juxtaposed with contemporary adaptations in Karbi pop and folk-rock, provide a vital medium for young individuals to articulate their dual identities—balancing modern aspirations with indigenous heritage (Engti, 2020). Engaging in cultural festivals, traditional dance forms, and musical collaborations allows modern youth to reconnect with their ancestral roots, effectively validating their self-worth and mitigating the alienation often induced by rapid urbanization (Terangpi, 2019).

5.2. Customary Governance and Community Support Systems

Beyond cultural expression, the Karbi traditional governance system provides a robust structural safety net. Operating alongside the constitutional framework of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), traditional village authorities—specifically the *Gaonburas* (village elders) and the traditional judicial council known as the *Mei*—maintain social order, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and reinforce community solidarity (Barpujari, 2018). While these systems are primarily administrative and juridical in nature, their communitarian ethos heavily influences the psychological climate of the village.

Furthermore, during times of personal, economic, or familial crises, the extended family and clan network, known locally as the *Kur*, frequently intervene to provide comprehensive psychological and material support (Beypi, 2021). This deeply ingrained collectivist safety net counteracts the individualistic atomization characteristic of modern societies, offering individuals a reliable framework of belonging and

security. Consequently, the persistence of these traditional institutions underscores an inherent sociocultural resilience, demonstrating how indigenous frameworks successfully adapt to contemporary challenges while safeguarding the emotional health of the Karbi community.

6. Gender Dynamics in the Transition Phase

Socio-emotional development is profoundly gendered, and Karbi young women and men navigate the transition from tradition to modernity through divergent pathways. As the Karbi community of Assam experiences the rapid incursions of globalization, market economies, and formal educational structures, traditional gender roles are undergoing critical re-evaluation. The psychological and social maturation of Karbi youth is thus mediated by conflicting demands: the persistence of customary patriarchal frameworks and the alluring, yet often exclusionary, promises of modern egalitarianism (Teron, 2018). Consequently, young males and females experience this liminal phase through starkly contrasting socio-emotional realities, marked by female negotiation of autonomy and male crises of identity.

6.1. Karbi Young Women: Autonomy Versus Patriarchy

Karbi society is traditionally patrilineal, yet women hold significant economic and domestic responsibilities, forming the backbone of agricultural production and household management (Teronpi, 2020). Modern education has opened new horizons for young Karbi women, leading to higher enrollment rates in higher education and professional sectors such as nursing, teaching, and civil services. This upward mobility has fostered a nascent feminist consciousness, enabling women to challenge historical socio-political exclusions within traditional village councils (such as the *Mei*).

However, these modern achievements often collide with traditional patriarchal expectations regarding marriage, domestic labor, and modesty. Young women frequently find themselves caught in a double bind: expected to excel in modern professional spheres while simultaneously bearing the brunt of traditional domestic duties and moral policing (Engti, 2021). The burden of cultural transmission falls disproportionately on women, who are tasked with embodying ethnic purity and traditional values. Despite these pressures, educated Karbi women are increasingly asserting agency, delaying marriage for career advancement, redefining gender roles within the household, and spearheading cultural preservation initiatives through literature, weaving cooperatives, and youth organizations.

6.2. Karbi Young Men: Crisis of Masculinity

Conversely, young Karbi men face a distinct crisis of masculinity driven by shifting economic realities and the erosion of traditional status markers. Traditional male roles—centered around shifting cultivation (*jhum*), community defense, hunting, and participation in communal governance—have lost currency in a modernized, service-based economy and state-regulated land regimes (Beypi, 2019). The transition from subsistence agriculture to a cash economy has disenfranchised many young men who lack access to capital or white-collar employment.

High rates of localized unemployment and underemployment among young Karbi men contribute to a pervasive sense of purposelessness and emasculation. This structural alienation often manifests in social

pathologies, including substance abuse, aggression, risk-taking behaviors, and identity dislocation (Baruah, 2017). Unable to fulfill the traditional provider role, yet ill-equipped for modern economic competition, young men may resort to aggressive assertions of patriarchal authority within the domestic sphere to compensate for public powerlessness, further straining inter-gender relations during this transitional era.

7. Educational and Policy Implications

Addressing the socio-emotional needs of Karbi tribal youth requires a multi-tiered, culturally sensitive approach that bridges the gap between traditional heritage and modern necessities. As indigenous communities in Northeast India navigate the complexities of globalization, rapid socio-cultural transformation, and economic integration, institutional frameworks must adapt to support the holistic development of the younger demographic. The following strategic interventions delineate the necessary pathways for educational reform, mental health expansion, youth empowerment, and intergenerational cohesion.

1. **Culturally Responsive Education:** Educational curricula in Karbi-dominant regions must integrate local history, folklore, ecological knowledge, and bilingual instruction. Conventional educational paradigms often marginalize indigenous epistemologies, inadvertently perpetuating a sense of cultural displacement among tribal students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). By embedding Karbi oral traditions, indigenous sciences, and mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) into formal schooling, educational institutions can validate indigenous identities. This pedagogical shift not only mitigates feelings of alienation and academic disengagement but also fosters cognitive flexibility and cultural pride, which are critical determinants of academic persistence and psychological well-being (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Cummins, 2000).
2. **Mental Health Infrastructure:** Mental health services in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao must be expanded and culturally contextualized. Rural and tribal healthcare frameworks in India historically suffer from a paucity of psychiatric resources and a heavy reliance on biomedical models that frequently overlook indigenous idioms of distress (Patel et al., 2011). Counseling services should train professionals in indigenous psychology, recognizing that Western therapeutic models must be adapted to resonate with collectivist tribal frameworks. Incorporating community healers, spiritual leaders, and peer support networks into mental health delivery models can reduce social stigma and ensure that psychological interventions are culturally resonant and accessible (Kirmayer, 2007).
3. **Youth Empowerment Programs:** Initiatives that leverage technology and modernization while reinforcing cultural heritage—such as digital archives of Karbi oral history, indigenous art workshops, and sustainable entrepreneurship programs—can channel youth energy constructively. Globalization often presents Karbi youth with a dichotomous choice between traditional lifestyles and modern economic aspirations. Empowerment initiatives must dismantle this false binary by fostering techno-cultural fluency. For instance, training youth in digital humanities to document endangered Karbi folklore or promoting ecotourism rooted in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) equips them with 21st-century economic competencies while simultaneously anchoring them in their ancestral heritage (Appadurai, 1996; Sen, 1999).
4. **Intergenerational Dialogue Platforms:** Community-led forums where elders and youth can engage in open, respectful dialogue about social change can bridge the generational gap and reduce

familial friction. Rapid acculturation often breeds cognitive dissonance and cultural friction between older generations, who prioritize traditional norms, and youth influenced by globalized media and urban migration (Berry, 1997). Institutionalizing structured dialogue spaces—such as revitalized youth dormitories (*Rongbong* or traditional community spaces) adapted for contemporary discourse—allows for the transmission of traditional values regarding kinship, governance, and environmental stewardship, while simultaneously giving youth a platform to voice modern aspirations without fear of censure (Tappan, 2006).

8. Conclusion

The socio-emotional development of Karbi tribal youth in North East India unfolds as a complex, ongoing negotiation between the pull of ancestral traditions and the push of global modernity. Situated within the geopolitical and cultural mosaic of the region, the Karbi indigenous community finds itself at a historical crossroads. Far from being passive victims of cultural assimilation or reactive resisters of change, contemporary Karbi youth operate as active social agents. They are engaged in the intricate task of crafting syncretic identities—ones that purposefully blend the traditional wisdom, cosmological frameworks, and communal values of their forebears with the digital literacy, cosmopolitan outlooks, and socio-economic tools of the modern world. This dynamic adaptation underscores a sophisticated agency, wherein youth selectively appropriate global phenomena to revitalize, rather than merely abandon, their indigenous heritage.

This transitional period, however, is invariably fraught with systemic challenges that profoundly impact psychological well-being and identity formation. The rapid encroachment of globalization, facilitated by digital media and formal Western education, often precipitates identity fragmentation among indigenous youth. Caught between the communal expectations of an agrarian society and the hyper-individualistic demands of a market-driven economy, young Karbis frequently experience profound alienation. Linguistic erosion—the gradual displacement of the native Karbi language by dominant regional and global tongues—further threatens the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, weakening the affective bonds that tie individuals to their ancestral roots. Furthermore, this ideological divergence frequently manifests as intergenerational conflict. Elders may perceive adaptive modern behaviors as a disregard for sacred customs, while youth may view traditional strictures as anachronistic. Consequently, these socio-cultural ruptures contribute to heightened mental health stressors, including anxiety, depression, and anomie, as young individuals struggle to find coherent ontological security in a rapidly shifting landscape.

Despite these vulnerabilities, the socio-emotional trajectory of Karbi youth is characterized by remarkable resilience. This resilience is deeply embedded within the institutional architecture of Karbi society—specifically through traditional governance structures, communal solidarity networks, and rich artistic expressions such as folklore, music, and indigenous dance. These cultural repositories provide vital spaces for emotional catharsis, peer support, and civic engagement. Traditional festivals and community-based rituals serve as pedagogical sites where youth reconnect with collective memories, thereby mitigating the atomizing effects of modernity. Moreover, contemporary Karbi youth are increasingly leveraging modern technological platforms to archive, celebrate, and disseminate their cultural heritage globally, transforming potential vulnerabilities into sources of empowerment and collective pride.

Ultimately, the trajectory of socio-emotional development for indigenous youth in North East India cannot be adequately understood through a binary lens that pits tradition against modernity as mutually exclusive forces. Sustainable well-being for Karbi youth is not contingent upon choosing one over the other, but rather upon fostering a harmonious synthesis that honors the historical integrity of the past while confidently and critically engaging with the opportunities of the future. Policy frameworks, educational curricula, and community interventions must therefore recognize and validate this syncretic reality. By bolstering indigenous knowledge systems alongside contemporary socio-economic support, stakeholders can cultivate resilient, culturally grounded environments that empower Karbi youth to navigate their evolving worlds with psychological fortitude and cultural pride.

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