

**Winter Workshop**  
Diphu, Karbi Anglong  
Assam

*Organised by:*

**University of Tartu**, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, Estonia

*in collaboration with*

**Centre for Karbi Studies**, Diphu, Karbi Anglong

*with support from*

**Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council**, Karbi Anglong, Assam

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**“Indigeneity”, Orality, and Liminal Ontologies:  
Methodological Pluralisms and Approaches to Culture**

This five-day Winter Workshop brings international scholars of all academic levels into the dense belief-environment of Karbi Anglong, Assam, Northeast India. Participants will have the opportunity to explore the “indigeneity” of Eastern Assam, with a special focus on the orality and liminal ontologies of the Karbi, the most populous “indigenous” group in Assam. The Karbi speak a Tibeto-Burman language and much of their expressive culture exists in the form of orally transmitted narratives. A sizeable number of oral narratives comprising multiple genres can be found in variation across Karbi Anglong.

The organisers have chosen Diphu, situated close to the border of Assam and Meghalaya, because it is rich in valuable folkloristic and anthropological knowledge that remains to be explored. One aspect of Karbi Anglong is its designation as a “spirit-scape” in which non-human entities thrive and liminal realities are inhabited, enacted, and transformed daily. There is a strong belief in other-than-human beings, such as the household deity *Peng*, who negotiates between familial lineages and the otherworld with the help of the *thekere* (ritual specialist). Orality – and the relationship between sound and “spirits” – is central to Karbi belief: “tribal” identity is connected with migration narratives and the *mosera*, which recounts Karbi origin. The *Chomangkan*, which guides the “soul” to the “land of ancestors” after death, completes this circle, as does the three-day *kacharhe* song performed among the (sometimes erotic) funerary songs typical to the secondary mortuary festival. Sound becomes both a medium for liminality and a declaration of “indigeneity”.

The Winter School will examine these marginalised worldviews, alternative ontologies, and liminal phenomena to reconsider the comprehensions and boundaries of “indigeneity”, the impact and history of orality, and the central role that liminality plays in Karbi life. “Indigenous”, “orality”, and “liminality” are not homogenized things, and scholars currently engage in discourse about what it is that even constitutes these ideas, terms, and practices (cf. Kraft and Johnson 2017 on “indigeneity”). Discussions of “vernacular religion” (Primiano 1995), the “ontological/recursive turn” (Descola 1992 & 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Latour 2013), and the “folkloristics of religion” (Valk 2017) will also be incorporated into the winter school.

The importance of liminality – the liminal rites, the middle stage in each of van Gennep’s rites of passage (1909) – was championed by Victor Turner, who discovered van Gennep’s work on the topic at a liminal threshold in his own life and was immediately inspired to write on liminality as a state or object “betwixt and between”

(Thomassen 2009; Turner 1967). Turner would go on to coin the term “liminoid”: a non-critical experience of liminality that can be playful, and one that he equated with leisure rather than ritual or transition. As Thomassen writes, in traditional anthropology: “there is a way into liminality and there is a way out of it” (Thomassen 2009). But what, then, can be said of the liminality of ontologies, ever-shifting worldviews, populated by threads of history, never permanent but ever present? And of the fieldworker who, like Turner, finds himself in a personal liminal state while investigating liminality?

Liminal ontologies exist outside of and beyond binary ideas of reality and realities. One ontology can interrupt and insert itself onto another; multiple ontologies and their subsequent belief-worlds can become entangled. It is increasingly acknowledged in scholarship that the perception of mundane reality is not the exclusive domain of the human, and object-oriented ontology would have us question whether ours is the primary perception to be investigated in the first instance: knowledge is not the sole demense of humans, but also can be claimed by other-than-human entities and even non-human persons (cf. Harvey 2005). Liminal ontologies are abstract environments in progress, continuously redefining themselves yet never exiting their liminal state. In this way, they differ from earlier anthropological assertions concerning liminality.

For the fieldworker, liminality is both an object of study in the amorphous cosmologies we document and the state we inhabit while doing so. Our awareness of liminality elevates the interview, allowing at least one party (and hopefully both parties) to eventually understand parts of what the other perceives (akin to Brigg’s idea of “vernacular theorizing” [2008]; reminiscent of Shulman’s suggestion that liminal ontologies occur when two groups meet and integrate [2019]). However, it is this same knowledge of liminality that keeps us aware of the limitations and ambiguities of any given interview. Ontologically, a fieldworker may find herself similarly between known nations of the mind and the expanding new worlds of the “other”. The experience of liminality in the field, unbound by its nature, can be both liberating and confining, progressive and constrictive.

Lectures and discussions will address multiple issues relating to the concepts of “indigeneity”, orality, and liminality and – a main focus of this undertaking – “liminal ontologies” – their content, their boundaries, and the experiences comprised thereby. Presentations on contextual topics relevant to these investigations are also most welcome. Local Karbi scholars and community members will contribute to the forum as well as support the field outings as guides. Various well-established fieldwork practices such as participant-observation, collaborative interview techniques, and visual and audio ethnographic recordings will be employed while the need for reflexivity and ethics continuously stressed.

In sum, this Winter Workshop will be an excellent platform for scholars to discuss and debate “indigeneity”, orality, liminality, liminal ontologies, and surrounding subjects. The Workshop in Karbi Anglong will allow for firsthand insights about fieldwork, analyses of relevant approaches to it, and an examination of methodological pluralisms that can be used to explore topics such as liminal ontologies.

Local hospitality and accommodation will be provided to all for the duration of the workshop. Interested applicants are kindly requested to submit a 300-word motivation letter, a 250-word abstract, and a CV or brief biography to [Karbiworkshop2020@gmail.com](mailto:Karbiworkshop2020@gmail.com) by 15 November 2019. Please also feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns you may have.

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