

Material Culture of the Dimasa Tribe of Assam: Brief Communication

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ABSTRACT: The Dimasas, an Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group, is one of the major hill tribes of Northeast India. In the 13th century, they were a strong royal family and are believed to be the first inhabitants of the Brahmaputra River Valley. The material culture of the Dimasa is rich and unique. The present paper attempts to bring to light some aspects of the material culture of this little-known tribe and in the process create a more holistic picture of the tribes of Northeast India.

INTRODUCTION

The Dimasa tribe is mainly concentrated in the North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, and Nagaon district in South-eastern Assam, and in Dimapur of the state of Nagaland. This colourful tribe has a history steeped in antiquity. What is interesting to note is that the Dimasas have managed to maintain their traditional customs, rituals, dress and even food habits even today. This perhaps points out to the high stage of cultural conservatism achieved by them. The most vivid examples of their material culture are seen in their workings with bamboo and cane, their intrinsic patterns in weaving, their distinct silver jewellery style and their rice beer making.

Bamboo Technology

The use of bamboo, sometimes described as the green gold of the North East is very popular among the Dimasas (Singh, 2013). The making of baskets is a task reserved exclusively for men and boys. There are no professional basket makers, but every man

produces baskets for his own domestic use. Living in a land where cane and bamboo are plentiful, they are naturally expert basket makers. Baskets of all shapes and sizes are found in use — from the rough little receptacle made in a few minutes into a cage like box which is used to carry live chickens during a journey, to the carefully woven baskets in which rice is carried up to the home from the fields. Some of the most important uses into which bamboo is crafted are:

Chani: It is a simple ‘v’ shaped strainer made by using a piece of solid bamboo strips and used for separating the rice beer from its suspended solid particles. Its top is kept open while the bottom part is fitted with a cane net. It is an indispensable instrument for preparation of rice beer. To make the instrument strong and durable, its top portion is often tied with cane-strips.

Yengthi: It is like a bamboo cylinder made from a stout bamboo of large cross section so that the cylinder is spacious for the introduction of a mug through it. *Yangthi* is used for removing suspended solids from rice beer stored in bigger containers.

Damakho: It is a type of smoking pipe used by the Dimasas. It is made of a piece of solid bamboo.

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Though it appears very simple, the instrument needs precise workmanship to maintain its efficiency. The body of the bamboo tube is punctured to receive another short piece of smaller bamboo tube in vertical position, over which the earthen container or *chillum* with tobacco and burning pieces of charcoal is placed.

Khojong Dima: It is a piece of comb used traditionally by the Dimasa. It is made of a selective species of bamboo known as *washi*. It measures 255mm in length, 85cm in widths and weighs about 50gm. The plain surface of the comb is engraved with decorative designs making it into a piece of art.

Pontho: A cylindrical bamboo container used for the safe storage of seeds for future cultivation. They are made of a special type of bamboo, the surface polish of which is removed by scrapping so that the seeds do not get spoiled due to lack of aeration.

Khaujeb: It is a kind of small basket and is made of fine bamboo or cane strips. It usually measures 11cm to 30cm in height but may slightly vary from place to place. The taller baskets are fitted with four legs to give it stability. *Khaujeb* is also covered with a lid. It is made with much care and precision, and thus can be regarded as a piece of art. *Khaujeb*s have varied use for them. The villagers use them as boxes to keep their valuables including ornaments and money. They are also seen to have been used for storing cotton and yarns, as also other small objects needed for weaving.

Jembai: It is a popular type of basket used by the tribe, which is made either of bamboo or cane and is handy for carrying smaller objects. It is generally 21cm in height and 18cm wide and 12cm in depth at its ends. Because of its easily portable nature, it is widely used for carrying items like refreshment to the fields and camp-sites. It was said that this type of piece is used for carrying *Ju-dima* (rice beer), *Shem* (salt) etc to a bride's house by the party of the groom.

Dikhang: It is a type of woven cane basket (generally hexagonal) made of half-solid canes which are perforated. Measuring about 40cm in height and with the wider opening at the top, it is slightly conical downward. The *Dikhangra* is carried on the back by passing a belt round the forehead. It is generally used for carrying water pots.

Besides the uses of bamboo materials mentioned above, bamboo is also used in almost all rituals of the

tribe. In the marriage ceremony bamboo is used extensively. But the most significant use of the bamboo is seen during the death ceremonies. Dimasa cremates the dead. Before the dead body is taken to the cremation ground the body is bathed ceremonially and then placed on a bier (*Bangfong*) made of split bamboo. The number of bamboo pieces used in the making of their bier shows the social status of the deceased. If the deceased belonged to a poor family only one bamboo is used for making the bier. The bier is made and designed by skilled labour, and the craftsman try to make it a very attractive one. It looks like a box made up of bamboo strips meshed into forming a sort of net covering.

Art of Weaving of Dimasa

Weaving has been one of the most excellent artistic crafts in Dimasa culture. Textiles are of fine quality, the brightness of colour and durability is amazing. It is generally believed that the Dimasas were the first to start silk culture in Assam (Majumdar, 2007). Spinning and weaving is confined only to the womenfolk and is considered as obligatory duties of the Dimasa women and girls. It is mandatory for young brides to weave their own wedding attire (Bhattacharjee, 2014). The Dimasa women weave clothes with the help of traditional loom called *Dauphang*. The process of weaving is called *Daophang Dauba*. The Dimasa loom is the primitive throw shuttle loom and is manually operated apparatus in which the Dimasa women weave exquisite cloth. Most of the designs are of different kind of flowers and animals. Dimasa women also practice the art of dyeing. The colours for the dyeing process are obtained by the women from locally available juices of shrubs and herbs.

Jewellery of Dimasa

The colourful Dimasas along with their traditional clothes use various types of jewellery to adorn their body. The male Dimasa use only two types of ornaments namely *yaocher* and *kharik*. The women use ornaments i.e. *phowal* – a necklace made of silver, the *khamaothai* – earring made of gold, *chandrawal* – silver necklace, *rangbarsa* – necklace made of silver coins, the *khadu* – a heavy bracelet made of silver, *li-ksim* – a nose ring made of silver, *li-ksim* – a

neckpiece of red beads and *jonsham* – a necklace of ordinary beads collected from the forest.

Making of Rice Beer

The production of household liquor is another rich indigenous knowledge system of the tribe. It also plays an important role in their socio-cultural life, as it is found to be associated with many occasions such as merry making, rituals, festivals, marriage and even death ceremonies. ‘*Ju*’ or the rice beer is an indispensable and integral part of the life of the Dimasas from the time of birth till death. *Ju*, prepared by mainly rice or sticky rice, can be of two types – *ju-dima* and *ju-haro*; the former is sweet in taste while the latter is a little sour and stronger. *Ju* has been considered to have many curative properties and ethno-medicinal values. Besides, *ju* is considered as the most valuable item to be served to the guests. After the birth of a child, puffed rice and a drop of *ju-dima* on a finger tip are to be placed into the mouth of the baby. This is an indispensable custom during the ritual called *nana dihonba* and rice beer is essentially brewed much ahead of time. Another instance of the extensive use of *ju* is during marriage rituals. Besides these customs there is a series of rituals connected to marriage where *ju-dima* is an integral part.

CONCLUSION

Most of the traditional ornament of Dimasa, as listed above are essentially of silver. Yet silver is not found locally in the north Cachar Hills. So scholars such as Nicholas Rhodes have gone on to suggest that silver that has been used traditionally must have been procured through trade between the Dimasas and the Burmese in the East (Rhodes and Bose, 2006). Thus the Dimasa tribe is a living museum of material culture — a culture which has managed to retain its unique identity through the ages and hopefully will continue to retain it into further future denying intrusion of modernism.

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