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Bamboo Crafts and Associated Knowledge System of The Karbi Tribe of Assam Plains, North- Eastern India: A Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Bamboo, one of the precious plant resources of the earth, plays a cardinal role in influencing civilised life patterns in Southern and Eastern Asian countries, where they are found in abundance. It has a long history in people's lives as cultural material. India is the second richest country in the generic bamboo resources after China. In India, bamboo is one of the most important forest species and has a wide distribution throughout the country and contributes to the rural economy. The North-Eastern region of India has a rich diversity of bamboo. It is integral to the life and culture of the ethnic communities of this region. In this area, the usage of bamboo made it an indispensable commodity for the rural people. The Karbi tribe of the Assam State of India has a rich cultural heritage of arts and crafts. They are masters in the skilful tradition of bamboo craft. Bamboo is an indispensable part of their livelihood mostly in food, shelter, household items, basketry, fishing gear, musical instrument, medicine, furniture and other various ethno-religious purposes. Various bamboo craft traditions of the community get the most creative expression through skill and the traditional knowledge of craftsmanship. This knowledge is essentially community-specific and restricted to the community and is accumulated through long interaction with the environment. Nowadays, this craft tradition is on the verge of extinction due to many reasons. Therefore, it is a timely requirement to document this craft tradition associated with the traditional knowledge system and wisdom. The present study has been designed in this context. During the study, standard anthropological methods have been applied. The present paper is based on the authors' empirical findings, and it probes into the cultural heritage of bamboo crafts of the Karbi community, which is governed by traditional knowledge and skills through empiricism. The paper also focuses on the importance and cultural significance of bamboo within the said community. The study also highlights this craft tradition's present scenario and provides recommendations to revive this heritage tradition.

Keywords: *Karbi, Traditional bamboo craft, Myth and Taboo, Craftsmen, Knowledge system, Cultural heritage*

Introduction

Bamboo (sub-family *Bambusoideae*, family *Poaceae*) is intricately connected with people from time immemorial, satisfying every human need, especially in East and South-East Asian regions. It has a long history in people's lives as cultural material. The utilization of bamboo goes back to 5000 years ago and found from China. The pictographic image for "bamboo" was found on the earthenware unearthed in the *Yangshao* cultural relics of Banpo Village, Xi'an in 1954. The symbol was likewise found in oracle bone inscriptions on old bronze articles. From the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) to the Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD), individuals wrote on "bamboo slips" (Bain, 2019). It is worth mentioning that bamboos are intermixed profoundly with the rural populace's everyday existence and are vital to their cultural, traditional, social, and economic necessities (Tewari, 1988; Madhab, 2003; Liese and Kohl, 2015). Bamboo also gives significant natural advantages. It has been seen that it is utilized for ecological purposes in numerous nations, for example, soil stabilization and erosion prevention on slope inclines and skirts. Bamboo is a multipurpose plant with a horde of applications such as human culture that uses construction material, furniture, walls, handicrafts, pulp and paper, edible shoots, and animal fodder. In India, bamboo products are of two sorts: articles needed for everyday use and of mid-range quality, which fit local necessities. Another category is articles of more refined quality, both decorative and useful, to meet more sophisticated business sectors' needs and tastes. It has been the companion of the majority of ethnic craftsmen In India. The bamboo plant plays a role in the tribal folklore of India. It is a typical belief in a few ethnic societies that humankind arose out of a bamboo stem. In certain parts of India, bamboo is additionally called *Kalpavriksha* (a sacred tree in Indian mythology satisfying all the requirements and desires) because of its various uses in everyday life in physical as well as in spiritual form. First immediate reference to bamboo in Indian literature is in *Rig Veda* (5000 BC). The plant also got a special mentioning in the great Indian epic, where Lord Krishna's flute was made of bamboo. The prologue to *Mahabharata* specifies about groves of bamboo. It is said that the Buddhist monks who went to Japan from

India to spread Buddhism had carried seeds of bamboo with them (Ghosh, 2014). These accounts propose that bamboo was fulfilling numerous needs in those days and that it was an essential part of individuals' lives. As a benevolent 'wood', bamboo offers itself a range of uses. Strips of bamboo are utilized by craftsmen in almost every state of the country. It has been seen that in India, Mongoloid people are principally engaged in bamboo crafts. They are specialized and inhabited in the North-Eastern part of the nation (spread over an area of 262179 km² representing around 8% of the nation's total geographical area) where they have access to a broad range of bamboo forests. This racial group links itself culturally and genetically to the people of Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, Indonesia, and Vietnam where bamboo craft displays the absolute best hand skills on the planet (Bain, 2019). The North-Eastern locale houses about two-thirds of the nation's bamboo resources spreading over a territory of about 3.10 million hectares where 89 types of bamboo species are available. This substantial endowment of nature to the locale is indispensable to life and culture of all the ethnic groups of North-Eastern India. Its multipurpose uses have made it an imperative resource for rural people. As it is an inseparable and intrinsic part of the ethnic communities' everyday lives, it has also been incorporated in their social and cultural events (Acharya et al., 2015). Studies on the crafts work of the Karbi community began during the British colonial rule. The earlier work was done by the British officers who gathered certain data on crafts other than their official obligations. Elwin (1959) and Alemchiba (1968) have made special reports on Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland's art, respectively. A few monographs on the tribes of North-Eastern India written by British administrators and contemporary anthropologists also have made plentiful references about the rich artistic accomplishments of the region's people. These reports, however, are quiet about the rich aesthetic crafts of the Karbis. Therefore, subsequently, the current study has been designed to do the needful.

Material and Method

The current study had been done within the Karbi tribal community in the Sonapur Tehsil of Kamrup Metropolitan District, Assam. Altogether twelve villages have been

chosen for the fieldwork, such as Khetri, Sholoibari Gaon Bargog N C, Nakuchi, Tegheria Gaon, Ulubam, Bhogpur, Barua Bari Gaon, Lomati, Maloibari, Pub Maloibari and Hahara Gaon. These villages were selected with the help of aged persons in the villages, based on the availability of craftsmen.

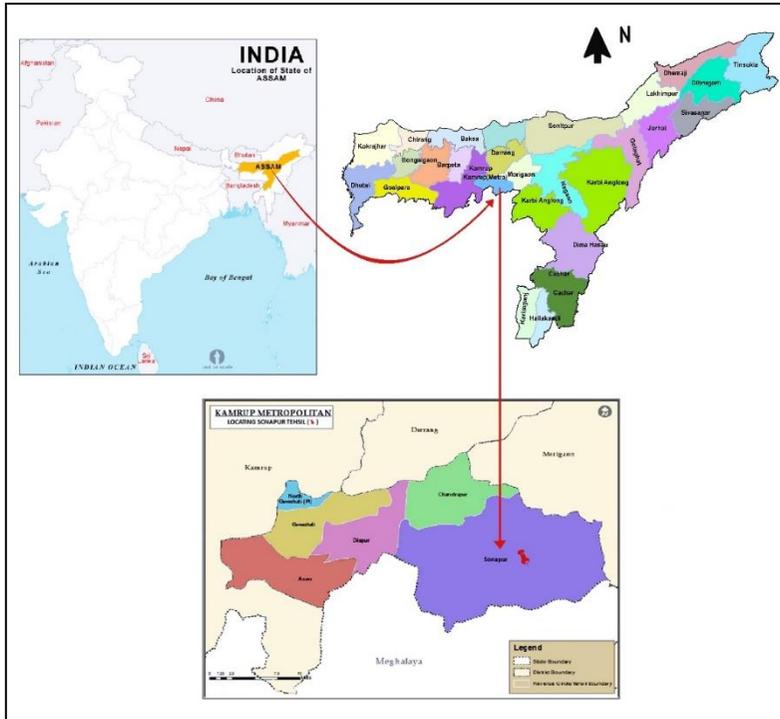


Figure 1: Locational map of the study area (Sonapur Tehsil)

The researchers selected eleven Karbi people as key informants. Most of the informants belong to an age between 45 to 65 years. Before the interview, Prior Informed Consent (PIC) was taken from each informant. The survey sample is comprised of twelve villages of the study area. All 457 people of the sample population of the Karbi community were selected for the present study. A review of the existing literature has been done from different secondary sources to briefly discuss the study area and the community living there. It is trailed by anthropological field investigation. Standard anthropological methods have been utilised for data collection, such as schedule survey method, interview method, case study method,

observation method, informal conversations, and audio-visual and photographic documentation. Interviews were conducted at three levels: individual level, group discussion and thorough discussion with the villagers. Key informants helped enormously to gain insight into the Karbi tradition and their belief system and understand the causes and implications of the changing social scenario. Every single Karbi household of the studied area has been visited for information assortment. Visual and audio-visual documentation has been done to record the intangible aspects associated with bamboo crafts.

Results and Discussion

I. The Karbi Community

The Karbi, formerly known as the *Mikirs* until 1976 in the Indian Constitutional Order (Sangma, 2020), is a ‘Scheduled Tribe’ of Tibeto-Burman lineage inhabiting the province of Assam, both in the hill and plain. The Karbis repudiate to identify themselves as *Mikirs* as they find the word is derogatory and imposed by outsiders. In Karbi Anglong hill district, the most predominant group of their population reside. Besides this, they are scattered in the plain areas of Kamrup and Nagaon districts of Assam, and to some extent Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Phangsho (1989) divides the Karbis into four spatial groups, viz- *Amri*, *Ronghang*, *Chingthong* and *Domralis*, covering different parts of Assam and Meghalaya.

II. Bamboo and its myths in Karbi Culture

Karbi livelihood is subject to their natural surroundings. They live in nature with amicability and oblige themselves by utilising and safeguarding it. This makes a two-route interconnectedness between the Karbis and nature. The material culture of the Karbis is nature-based. Bamboo is profoundly established in its way of life and tradition. The plentiful availability of bamboo has made them vigorously reliant on it for their endurance. Bamboo is an essential resource for them. The connection between bamboo and the Karbi is strong. It will not be amiss to affirm that bamboo is an integral part of the Karbi people's salvation in the Northeast. Its versatility makes it the community's primary preference, considering its strength and endurance while

being a multipurpose plant. It is overwhelming to assume livelihood without bamboo because of bamboo's intrinsic attachment in all of the tribal community's traditions. The entire occupational pursuit has been intimately associated with different bamboo-made implements. The Karbis utilise the shoots of bamboo in their daily diet. A specific portion of the bamboo is utilised as therapeutic assets in a few minor cases. It is accepted that diseases like stomachache, headache, and vomiting are supposed to be curable from *arjang aphelo* (a juice prepared from young bamboo stems). Bamboo shoots are additionally used as a remedy for relieving measles. Bamboo is immensely associated with the religious and social aspects of the Karbi people. There is a well-known axiom common among the Karbi individuals, as "*Karbi aso ke jintak cheripdongse pirthe kevang lapen jintak cherip pondongse chomarong kedam*" (a Karbi is brought into the world with *jintak* (bamboo split) in his grasp and leaves the world holding *jintak*) (Teron & Borthakur, 2012). This expression talks a volume about the reliance of the Karbis on bamboo. For the duration of their lives, bamboo assumes a significant role. The Karbis have been utilising Bamboo for a long time. The origin myth of bamboo known as *Chek keplang* is found in the Karbi community's folk song called *Chek keplang alun*. There is likewise a belief that *Songsar Richo*- sent *Sairikpo* to mother earth to cultivate bamboo so that human beings could utilise this sacred plant for rituals and other material purposes. It is accepted that *Hemphu* (legendary person) first taught the use of bamboo as a custom in the Karbi society. The Karbis believed that a mythical person known as *Thireng-vangreng* was the first person to introduce the readiness of bamboo-made crafts. In the economic status of the Karbi society, bamboo is an essential and valuable resource. The historical backdrop of the utilisation of bamboo, for at all purpose depends on legends that likewise incorporate the conventional conviction of the origin of bamboo. A famous dance called *Hacha Kekan* is performed to celebrate the harvesting season of *Han-up* (bamboo shoots). At the event, seniors portray bamboo's origin and its utilisation among the Karbis through folk song while little youngsters dance to the tune's rhythm. Certain taboos are likewise seen on bamboo – bamboo once utilised in funeral rituals, different bamboos from the same grove are not used for household purposes, and bamboo shoots of the new season are not

devoured until *Rongker*, a yearly community celebration is performed. A variety of bamboo known as *Kaiphoo* cannot be planted in the household, as it is a cultural taboo. It is believed that if bamboo is used for any impure purpose like the dead, then the whole clumps of bamboo cannot be used for rituals and other household requirements. Moreover, bamboo removed during its early stage, which attain full maturity in the latter part, also cannot be used for ritual and household purposes. Further, the clumps of bamboo covered entirely with creepers, cannot be used for ceremonial and household purposes (Singha and Timung, 2015).

III. Bamboo craft and its usage in the Karbi community

Karbi people have a rich social legacy of craftsmanship and artworks. Bamboo is a crucial piece of their livelihood in food, shelter, household items, medicine, furniture, craftwork, and various ethnoreligious purposes. Bamboo is utilized from multiple perspectives to make several articles needed in their day-by-day life.



Figure 2: Usage of Bamboo crafts among the Karbi community

Bamboo craft traditions of the community get the most imaginative articulation through craftsmanship. The people make only those things from bamboos which are needed in their everyday life. One cannot envision the cultural life of these people

without bamboo and its products. There can be no end to the utilisations and utility of bamboo. In their society, the utility of bamboo stretches over a much more comprehensive range. Among them, bamboo-made items are intimately associated with house construction, household articles, agricultural implements, utensils, fishing gear, musical instruments and several other aspects. They primarily use such products through their method of crafting. Bamboo-made products have immense importance in the different religious and cultural festivals. In the study region, the Karbi people utilise different bamboo species such as *Kaipho* (*Dendrocalamus hamiltonii* Nees & Arn. ex Munro), *Bambusa tulda*, *Bambusa balcooa*, *Bambusa affinis* Munro, *Melocanna baccifera* and *Schizostachyum dullooa* (Gamble) R.B.Majumdar. Bamboo is generally utilised in house construction, as well as for fences, bridges and toilets. A typical Karbi house is built on a bamboo stage using both wood and bamboo post. The stage is a few feet over the ground, and for roofing purpose thatch is used. The walls are made of bamboo split. The Karbis more or less abandon traditional housing pattern. The Karbis use many household articles made of bamboo such as, *Lankpong*, *Bolongchir*, *Bilup*, *Pachi*, *Haak*, *Kotha*, *Dhari*, *Beleng*, *Khorahi*, *Khongra*, *Murha*, *Vo-um*, *Ingkrung* (*Chaloni*) etc.



Figure 3: Different Types of Bamboo craft of Karbi community (a. Khongra, b. Kotha, c. Hororu, d. Bolongchir, e. Pachi, f. Juluki, g. Kotha, h. Khaloi, i. Bilup, j. Jakoi)

Lankpong is an elongated bamboo container used for drinking water, rice beer and also for cooking food. Bolongchir is a kind of strainer used for purifying banana Khar (alkali) which is used for cooking and washing clothes. Ash of the dried banana plant is put in the bolongchir followed by pouring water. Water and bamboo ash get mixed up and release straw or a slightly brown filtrate, which is the required product. Bilup is used for carrying dust particles during cleaning and sweeping. After sweeping the area with a broom, dust particles are carried in the bilup and thrown away. Pachi is a bamboo basket used for storing grains, and it prevents insects from entering. This product has a range of purposes and is extensively used in every household. Two varieties of the product are found, one is square-shaped, and the other has a rounded mouth with a quadrilateral bottom. Apart from storing the square-shaped pachi is also used for measuring grains. It carries roughly 5 kilograms of grain at a time. Khongra is a large-sized bamboo basket generally used for carrying firewood, dry leaves, vegetables etc. The upper part of the basket is wider than the lower part. The mouthpart of the basket is round while the base is round or rectangular. The upper part of the basket is tightly woven, but the lower part is loosely woven. A cane strip is wrapped around the mouth to make it stronger. In the middle part, there are two-three tightly weaved lines given to make a strong basket belt which is also fixed to the basket for carrying purposes. In the middle of the belt, soft padding made of the bamboo strip is fixed so that the person carrying it does not feel pain on the brow. Haak is another big basket used for storing unhusked paddy and sometimes it is also used to carry firewood and vegetables. It is long and rectangular. The basket base is a fixed rectangular wooden stand, and after the weaving of the basket, the mouth portion is made stronger by using a wide portion of bamboo piece wrapped up in a flexible cane strip. A belt is also attached to it for carrying. The body is made tightly with weft and wrap bamboo without any holes in between. It is woven in the twilled pattern. Four bamboo splits are fixed around the edges of the basket to keep it strong. They prepare their country liquor (Hor), and for its preparation, they use Antar, which is made from bamboo strips for this purpose only. They also use different fishing gears made out of bamboo such as Lahoni, Juluki, Khaloi, Jakoi, Soroha etc. Lahoni is an elongated implement with a pan-shaped head for carrying

water attached to a long bamboo handle. It is used for removing water from the fishing site. Juluki is a fishing gear which is dome-shaped on the top with a short stem of about 6-inch measurement open. The breadth at the base shifts from 2-3 feet, while the height ranges from 2-3 feet. It is set up out of little bamboo strips secured with fine and flexible stick slips. It is utilised for fishing in shallow water. The fisherman holds it from the top and rubs its edge in the mud. At whatever point any fish is trapped, he gets his hand inside through the stem to grasp the fish. The Khaloi prepared with bamboo strip is used for the temporary keeping of fishes during hand-net fishing. The Khaloi is woven in the shape of an earthen Kalasi or pitcher. The Jakoi is a wickerwork shovel species either dragged along the bottom or placed on the water bed to catch the fishes that take refuge in it when the weed is trampled. It is made of bamboo slips, which are locally known as Dai. Jati bamboo is specially used for making this particular implement. Soroaha is made of a single bamboo piece. One end of the bamboo is symmetrically split into continuous vertical sections and those sections are tied with strings, which makes the article hollow in shape. It is placed in agricultural fields submerged in shallow water to catch the fish. It works like a single ended fish trap. They practice light fishing with the help of Bhota (a traditional hurricane lamp) made of split bamboo. During monsoon nights, fishers take Bhota and search for fish in shallow water, particularly in paddy fields. They also use Bana during fishing. It is made of fine bamboo strips with jute coir. It is fixed with the help of bamboo and rope. Their musical instruments are also made of bamboo, and among the musical instruments, they use the flute to a large extent. It is locally known as Pongse. There are eight holes made on it. Pongse is played as an accompaniment to songs, and musical rhythms produced by different kinds of Karbi musical instruments. Some of their hunting implements are also made of bamboo. They make different bird traps from bamboo strips. The weaving pattern of the bamboo traps is unique to the Karbis. Like other tribal communities, Karbis also make rain shades for their heads mostly when they work in the agricultural field in the rainy season. These shades are made of bamboo strips. The whole structure is neatly woven out of bamboo. The inner portion of the shade is covered with leaves. Since it is to be placed on the head, it does not have any handle like an umbrella. Bamboo has an

important role in various textile operations in Assam. Among the Karbis, many of the parts of their handloom are made of bamboo. During weaving for design purpose, they use bamboo-made sticks of different sizes. Their spinning wheel is made of bamboo along with wood. In the Karbi society, religion and nature are linked very closely. They worship almost all-natural objects of the region. Worship of nature is an integral part of their society. They perform various ceremonial and ritual occasions such as Chojun, Rongker, Peng, Chinthong Arnam, Rit Anglong etc. Their traditional priests perform these ceremonies and rituals. In these ceremonies, bamboo plays an important role. Many small bamboo baskets (Arnam-hotton), and sitting and drinking arrangements (Anghoi-Alankpong) for the deities are used on these occasions. During Chojun ritual bamboo is used to construct Kuntiri and Hamren (temporary huts erected for female and male in the open field during the ritual). They also use Micham (bamboo made basket used to keep the meat) during this ritual. The death ritual of the Karbi known as Chomangkan is associated with bamboo. In this ritual, they use bamboo post, which is locally known as Banjar.



Figure 4: Making of Bamboo basketry by the Karbi people

It is richly decorated. The top of the post is covered with many green leaves and three bamboo sticks projected on three sides. Small flags and bamboo baskets are attached

to these sticks (Zaman, 2003). The Karbi community depends on two designing patterns, locally known as Biban and Bijon, for preparing several bamboo crafts. Sometimes they make baskets by combining these two patterns.

IV. Traditional Knowledge

The spectacular variety and different bamboo craft types unmistakably show the aptitude just as the skilled workers' traditional knowledge. This knowledge is basically exclusive and restricted to the community and is accumulated through long interaction with the environment. Such a knowledge system has been safeguarded, maintained and transmitted over generations. It forms the cultural heritage of the Karbi people. Locally available bamboo is the raw material for their craftwork. They believe that the creator god blesses the bamboo craftsmen, and she has given this unique ability to them. As indicated by one key informant (one of the craftsmen of the Khetri), "I get information from my dad. He was an expert craftsman. He knew to make each kind of bamboo basket. It requires a special talent, and my dad had that". According to one community member, "It is male-dominated craft work. Male learns how to make baskets from their father, grandfather". However, from the field investigation, it has been found that it is not fundamental that in a craftsman family where the father is an expert artisan, his son should also be a specialist. Any male can learn. The young and interested people gather knowledge on bamboo weaving for bamboo basketry through learning. The older generation and specialised artisans show them the best ways to make baskets and to prepare the strips with the accurate thickness and length - all the things they are required to learn. They likewise learn how to choose and cut the bamboo. Through observation and perception, they know which sorts of bamboo are to be selected, and in this manner, the traditional knowledge gets transferred from one generation to another, orally. The association of bamboo and bamboo-based traditional knowledge system can be visualised in every material appearance of the Karbis. Here, the materialistic expression supports the non-material background as a form of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The Karbis of Assam planes has a rich cultural heritage in bamboo crafts. They have mastered the art of bamboo weaving to make different articles. Their bamboo craft portrays the artistic calibre and creative imagination of the local craftsmen. The bamboo craft of the Karbis reflects not only their traditional knowledge system but also their beliefs and practices, their myths and legends, and their emotions and ethics. Karbis take pride in their tradition of basket weaving. The best part is that basket weaving is considered an intrinsic part of their lives. Keeping pace with Indian society as a whole, Karbi society is also changing. Even the once-remote villages are now exposed to globalization, modernity and education. The Assam plane is no exception to this. As obvious consequences, Karbi community is gradually losing many of their traditional practices. Their dependency on nature is decreasing gradually. This bamboo craft tradition is also facing a receding curve. The major reasons behind it are the global market economy, easy availability of luxury and utility items, less interest in their traditional knowledge etc. It is almost losing its real meaning to the new generation. They are heavily dependent on modern items. Most of the Karbi households now use utensils made of aluminium and stainless steel and Chinese crockery instead of using their ethnic items. According to the local people, "The modern things are more comfortable in cleaning and washing and thus hygienic too. Bamboo items cannot be cleaned properly; say the bamboo cup, it bears the stain of tea even after washing, and due to regular use, there will be a visible black coating which is not hygienic at all. However, in the case of Chinese crockery, you will not find such things". Another point is that modern utensils are easy to use and cheap for buying. According to one craftsman, "Basketry making is time-consuming; these things are purely need-based. These are not for consumerism. So, the craftsmen get little money from their neighbourhood when they are requested to make basketry for them. Nevertheless, they are to invest a lot of time and energy. If they use this time and energy in other work, they can earn some money." This kind of information easily describes the reason for the decline of this craft tradition. Therefore, it is high time to protect this traditional knowledge system. There is an urgent need to properly

preserve this knowledge system and integrate it with modern scientific values before it is lost forever. The preservation of vast knowledge-reservoirs demands an essential belief in indigenous people's lifestyles and cultures. There needs a plan to revive their cultural heritage, and they also need government support to protect it. If they want to promote their handicrafts, then heritage tourism can play an important role. The local people will get the economic benefit, and for that, there needs to be infrastructure. If the government does the needful in these villages, then only this craftwork can survive. The government or other agencies can make special efforts to encourage the folk arts and frame special programmers to preserve and strengthen this vanishing art form.

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