Biological motifs and designs on traditional costumes among Karbis of Assam

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Traditional costumes are often adorned with designs depicting indigenous flora and fauna, objects and even some abstract figures. Field study was undertaken with the objective to elucidate the traditional knowledge on weaving and to find out the intrinsic relationships between biological objects and cultural artifacts during 2002-2008 among the Karbis following unstructured interview and through personal observations by the authors. Motifs and designs are weaved or embodied following certain indigenous techniques viz. kerip, ketur, keran, kehom, keroi, kepharlem and kethak. The findings of the study ideate that traditional motifs and designs on textiles are not for mere display but are emotionally associated with their social, cultural and religious life. Further, the similarity in material culture of the Karbis and Tiwas observed in some respects may be attributed to their co-habitation in the same Geographical area and reciprocal influence of their cultures.

Keywords: Karbi tribe, Backstrap looms, Biological motifs and designs, Flora and fauna, Cultural identity

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North Eastern region of India is unique for its ethnic and cultural diversities coupled with biological diversity. The region is largely inhabited by hill tribes of Mongoloid origin. Among the prominent tribes of the region are the Karbis who possess unique traditions and culture distinct from other hill tribes. Ethnically, they are Mongoloid and speak a dialect belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese, particularly Kuki-Chin sub-group of languages. Their original habitat is believed to be in the Kuki-Chin area, in an around the Chinwin river valley in western Myanmar, before being finally settled in present Karbi Anglong district of Assam and other parts of North Eastern Region of India.

Preparation of different items of clothing occupies an important part of material culture of the Karbis. Dresses with distinctive colour, motifs and designs not only reflect the cultural identity of the Karbis but also indicative of possession of rich cultural heritage and traditional Knowledge. A Karbi man generally remains bare-bodied but usually with a red or white poho (turban) on his head. A loin cloth called rikong is worn keeping two ends measuring about 35cm freely hanging in the front and in the rare. In a formal dress, however, he wears a sator, a loin cloth, down to the calf. A woman wears a thick and black specially woven cloth called pini reaching up to the calf. A belt called vamkok, a thick beautifully decorated piece of cloth about 5cm wide and about 200cm long is tied around the waist to fix the pini. The chest is wrapped with another piece of cloth called pijeso, or jeso in short, which serves like a present-day blouse. The upper part of the body is covered with a well decorated piece of cloth referred as pekok by tying the ends of the cloth so as to hang from the right shoulder of the user.

Loom is locally referred as Therang, while the warp and weft are respectively known as arank and atuk. The shed for weaving is called ‘asei’. Kachevur atherang refers to back strap loom while the improved fly shuttle loom is called tanhai or kor atherang (Kor: Machine). Clothes of all types are weaved on local back strap loin looms (Fig. 1) while yarns are spun from cotton (Gossypium herbaceum L., Malvaceae) or Erisilk. Yarns are often dyed with colours of blue, red or yellow (exclusively) extracted from plant and animals sources and sometimes from minerals.
Karbis, jambili athon, etc. are weaved on loin looms even today. The present paper deals with traditional Knowledge of weaving motifs and designs on garments and its relationship with socio-religio-cultural life of the Karbis and dynamism of traditional knowledge.

Methodology
The present paper is the result of field work undertaken during 2002-2008 at Domoka, Diphu, Samelangso, Hamren, Monjili, Krokengdang, Ulukunchi and Amdoba in Karbi Anglong district. Prior Informed Consent from Rong Sarthe (village headman) and informants was obtained for undertaking field study. Elders, particularly women were consulted in collecting information on the concepts of indigenous motifs, making of loin looms and the different types of clothes weaved on it. They were also requested to narrate indigenous motifs and designs and techniques of the same. Different types of clothes and their uses were also collected during field study. Extensive visits to rural areas were undertaken because most textiles with indigenous designs and motifs are available among rural folk. Motifs on textiles among other tribes such as the Pnars, Tiwas were also studied and compared with those of the Karbis.

Results
Spinning and weaving, among the Karbis is an exclusive occupation of women who have been weaving dresses for men and for themselves. Traditional clothing items of the Karbis are often adorned with beautiful designs of indigenous flora and fauna, objects and even some abstract figures. Further, expertise on weaving is considered as a qualification to become a bride and also status in the society. Clothing needs of all types are weaved on loin looms and the various garments include pini, pekok, vankok, jambili, jamborong, pohoh, seleng, maflar, choi hongthor, jir-ik (bapi), pi seleng, kapor, pilu, jeso, pisarpi, etc. Traditional costumes are often adorned with beautiful designs depicting indigenous flora and fauna, objects such as sarku (umbrella), hijap (hand fan) and aeroplane and even some abstract figures. The designs are of geometric pattern as found in other hill tribes of North Eastern Region of India. Each garment has specific function in the society and therefore, represents their cultural identity. Significantly, Jambili Athon, the traditional wood craft of the Karbis was not used as motif in traditional garments, which suggests that the expertise of weaving was acquired long before the introduction of Jambili Athnon.

Studies among the Karbis revealed that the art of weaving motifs and designs involves various techniques producing equally varied designs and motifs as enumerated below:

1. **Ketur (ketur: to make a shed)**: This is the most commonly practiced technique of weaving designs among the Karbis and other tribes. The technique includes selecting desired number of yarns of arank (warp) at appropriate location and scooping the yarns with harpi (Fig. 2); asei (shed) so created is maintained by inserting a bamboo stick called barlim. Many such series will be selected till a complete outline of the desired design is completed. The garment is weaved with weft and beaten either with harpi or ingthi (reed). At points marked for design, yarn of desired colour is inserted through the previously created asei and the barlim removed. It is then weaved with a few atuk (weft) to maintain firmness. It is continued till the design is completely weaved. Designs weaved through ketur is called amang. Many motifs and designs are weaved through ketur but traditional ones include bidumkek (cincinate coiled leaf of Diplazium esculentum (Retz.) Sw.; Athyriaceae; Fig. 3a), plumplam abo (ovary of Dillenia indica L.; Dilleniaceae), Ingsu mahar anghphar (flower of Rubus lucens Focke; Rosaceae), mirjove anghphar (flower of Acacia nilotica (L.) Del. ssp. indica (Benth.) Bren.; Mimosaceae), thoithi suri anghphar (flower of Cucumis sativus L.; Cucurbitaceae), suve arvo (compound leaves of Acacia oxyphylla Graham ex Benth.; Mimosaceae), hambi ahom (pod of Entada purgaatha DC.; Mimosaceae), long aling (base of Karbi traditional wooden mortar), keching arveng (wings of Gandhi bug; Fig. 3b), che-he amek (eyes of crab), vorale (Spangled drongo), theroh (monkey), chetung (turtle), ingthi (reed), sarku (umbrella; Fig. 3c), lobong arongk (banana plant), ingnar (elephant; Fig. 3c), monit (human; Fig. 3c), hijap (hand fan; Fig. 3c), voram (peacock; Fig. 3d), phongrong angsu (spinous fruits of Castanopis indica (Roxb.) DC.; Fagaceae; Fig. 4), rot ahem (aeroplane) and many more.

Amang can be weaved only in modern looms; the latter is always stretched and thus, can subtend the inserted barlims. However, in back strap looms the warp is alternately stretched and loosened and thus cannot subtend barlims, if inserted.
2. Kerip (Kerip: to tie): This is most prized technique of weaving designs and motifs among the Karbis. Yarns of desired numbers and frequencies are picked manually from arank (warp) to create an asei (shed). Extra yarns of desired colour are inserted through the asei and then weaved with atuk (weft) by beating with flat piece of wood called harpi. The process is continued till a desired design comes out. Weaving with atuk after every insertion of yarn, gives firmness and continuity of the designed portion with the undersigned part of the garment. Designs and motifs weaved through kerip is called vosomek (Fig. 5). It is believed to be the first design introduced among Karbis and their weaving is mandatory on some traditional dresses such as choi hongthor (Fig. 6). Vosomek comes in varied traditional motifs such as che-he amek (eyes of crab), vosaru amek, turchim amekso, long aling (base of traditional wooden mortar), tanhai amang, thar-et kona, keching arveng (wings of Gandhi bug), etc.

Weaving of vosomek is very complex and time consuming for which modern weavers have switched to easier techniques. For the same reason today the art is known only to a few elderly women. It is the most revered technique of weaving motifs of the Karbis.

3. Kehom (kehom: to hang something): This is another difficult art of weaving designs on garments. In this case additional designs are made and stitched along the margins of garment or embroidery is made along the margins. Motifs produced through this technique are called amarborg or marborg in short. Ok arbung (backbone of fish) is a popular marborg weaved on garments.

4. Keran (keran: to make warp): As the name suggests, designs are marked while making the warp for the loom. In other words, yarns of desired colour are made as part of arank and the asei is also adjusted. In this type weaving is easy and fast as no barlims are required and all necessary arrangements are predetermined. Designs produced through the technique of keran are called ahi (stripe) and the latter are always along the warp. Ahi is selectively weaved on clothes such as pilu, pikapor, pekok, jir-ik and other garments.

5. Keroi (keroi: to stitch): Though keroi literally means to stitch, traditionally this technique involves joining two pieces of garments by stitching and producing motifs in the process. Garments that requires stitching includes pini (womens’ lower garment), pilu, etc. Designs and motifs weaved through the above 4 techniques can be produced by keroi.

6. Keharlem (keharlem: to make rope): This technique involves weaving rope from the ends of unweaved warp of garments and thereby making knots that adds beauty to the product.

7. Kethak (kethak: to weave): This technique of weaving leads to the formation of apai (horizontal stripe) on garments. Yarns of desired colour of weft are simply weaved without interruptions till apai of desired width is produced. Apai is always perpendicular to the warp. Though garments of any type can be weaved by this technique, pi sarpi is worth mentioning as this traditional red and black striped garment is used by elderly women only (Fig. 7).

Discussion

Traditional motifs and designs on textiles among the Karbis are not for mere display but are emotionally associated with their social, cultural and religious life. Vorale is a traditional bird, plumplam abo is used as hair wash, phongrong is used in ritual, seeds of hambi is used in traditional sport, consumption of che-he is a taboo for priests, thero is a source of nuisance in jhum, lobong has multiple use (food, medicine, raft, rituals), long (wooden mortar for threshing paddy and for grinding other items), keching (important crop pest), thoithe (edible fruit and a regular jhum crop), dumkek (an important vegetable) and many other designs and motifs are also associated with the socio-religio-cultural life of Karbis.

Pnars (Jaintias) of Karbi Anglong wear simple dresses and lack motifs that adorn dresses of the Karbis and Tiwas. Bidumkek motif is also common among Tiwas. Similarity in material culture of the Karbis and Tiwas observed in some respects may be attributed to their co-habitation in the same Geographical area and reciprocal influence of their cultures. This reflects the dynamic nature of Traditional Knowledge. It is reported that the Karbis have acquired the expertise of weaving from the Tiwas but the former make more diverse motifs than the latter tribe. It can be explained that the art of weaving was introduced to the Karbis by the Tiwas but in the course of time the Karbis have developed additional knowledge resulting in weaving more diversified motifs traditional to the tribe. This explanation seems probable because the Karbis, who
till recently lived a semi-nomadic life before settling in the present habitat (Karbi Anglong district and adjoining areas), would have been impossible to generate time to learn knowledge of high skill weaving who at that time, as per historical records frequently moved from one place to another for safety and fertile land for jhum. If it is so, the material culture of the Karbis before and during the period of migration needs a thorough investigation.

Conclusion
Traditional costumes adorned with motifs and designs are indispensible part of social, cultural and religious life of the Karbis. Dresses, as well as colour and motifs and designs on textiles not only reflect cultural identity but also indicate possession of rich traditional knowledge and also source of their history. However, knowledge of embodying traditionally used motifs and designs are fast declining among the Karbis due to acculturation and access to machines made textile products. Further, weaving clothes in back strap looms is confined to a few elderly women only. In the past, expertise developed in weaving among girls was considered as a qualification to become a bride and also status in the society. Value addition to local textile products has the potential to uplift rural economy. A jacket with motif of Jambili Athon, traditional wood craft of the Karbis and muffler are popular items and these are revered choice as gifts in social and cultural occasions.

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