Handicraft skills of Yak Pastoralists in Arunachal Pradesh

Leema Bora*, Vijay Paul, Joken Bam, A Saikia & D Hazarika
NRC on Yak (ICAR), Dirang, Arunachal Pradesh, 790101
E-mail: leemabora@gmail.com

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The Yak Pastoralists, known as the Brokpas, of Arunachal Pradesh are expert craftsmen making all the items of their daily utility for processing and storing yak products by themselves. The wood and bamboo processing techniques, adopted by them are a complex set of processes embodying Traditional Indigenous Technological Knowledge. This Paper is an initiative to understand and document these handicraft skills of the Brokpa community. The crafting patterns of bamboo milk churner, storing boxes, baskets, etc. adopted by them has become an art form passed on from one generation to another and the Brokpas are the preserver of this rich culturally important craftsmanship. The workmanship of these artisans is of very high order and indicative of their rich cultural heritage. Crafting in their community, exclusively done by the male folk, has immense potential for being developed in commercial lines for obtaining economic returns.

Keywords: Yak Pastoralist, Brokpa, Handicraft, Bamboo, Wood, Cane, Arunachal Pradesh

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Arunachal Pradesh has a vibrant craft tradition and every tribe excels in craftsmanship1. The state has 16 major tribes of whom the Adi group is the largest in number, followed by Nishi, Wancho, Monpa, Nocte, Tagin, Apa Tani, and Hill Miri and every tribe has its own customs and traditions and each uses cane and bamboo to fulfill its everyday needs2. These are reflection of their rich tribal culture which finds expression in the form of traditional hats decorated with feathers and beak of birds, haversacks, baskets, utensils, etc. The cultural pattern of a society is reflected through the quality crafts and craftsmanship of the people3. The Brokpa community in Arunachal Pradesh is culturally and ethnically distinct group of semi-nomadic pastoralist people, belonging to the Monpa tribe, depending on yak herding as one of the major means of livelihood by following an annual transhumance system of yak management. Monpa tribe is presently the dominant tribe of West Kameng and Tawang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Historically they are the aborigines of that area and once ruled a Kingdom called Monyul, or Lhomon that existed from 500 BC to 600 AD. It was believed that Monyul stretches from present day Tawang upto West Bengal, Assam, part of Sikkim and even the Duars plains at the Himalayan Foothills. The Monpa people are followers of Tibetan Buddhism of the Gelugpa sect, although several members of the Bhut Monpa are followers of Bon and Animism. The Brokpas are expert craftsmen making all the items of their daily utility, for processing and storing yak products, by themselves. Bamboo baskets, wooden tiffins, milking stools, milking can, milk churners, cheese (Churpy) separator, saddle, salt tea maker and utensil scrubbers are some of the common household items which are made by them. All these products are results of home based crafts.

Methodology

This present study is an initiative to understand and document the handicraft skills of the Brokpa community in Arunachal Pradesh. Considering the extreme remoteness and difficult communication links to the Brokpa Villages, field work has been carried out in three accessible villages under Dirang Circle in West Kameng district. The craftsmen, in these villages (Melkmu, Lubrang and Dirang) were identified and considered as respondents. Documentation works of the present study was mostly done on the basis of empirical data collected through fieldwork in the natural context of craftsmanship in the year 2008 and continued for 2½ yrs. The data
was gathered through individual interview of the respondents, focused group discussion and a questionnaire with open ended questions to explore and document the techniques of crafting. Since the time required from initial collection of raw material, its processing into finished product was quite long, involving many months, 7-8 visits were done to each of these villages round the year. To discuss the different aspects of crafting works and establish its correctness a focus group discussion (FGD) was finally conducted with a group of purposively selected participants comprising of elderly villagers, village headman or Gaonbura and members of Dungkarpa Welfare Association, a local Non Govt. Organisation, working for the welfare of brokpa community of West Kameng district.

Results

Crafting in the Brokpa society is exclusively done by the male folk and all of the craftsmen under the present study were observed to be male. The raw materials, bamboo, wood and cane, were always collected from the forest areas. They are very knowledgeable in recognising trees and bamboo of their interest. Bamboo, called sho, used for crafting was mostly of the species Dendrocalamus hamiltonii, Bambusa tulda, Bambusa pallida etc. Similarly, wood from Phrengpa (Quercus wallichiana) tree is utilized by them. Mostly, items of daily utility were crafted by the Brokpas.

In general, three types of crafting are done by them:
1. Cylindrical churn/ can/ box making,
2. Three dimensional basket weaving, and
3. Wood curving.

A list of the craft items, along with its description and utility, made by the Brokpas of Monpa tribe are listed in Table 1 and shown in Figs. 1-11.

The entire process of making of cylindrical milking can is depicted in Fig. 12, (A to O). The process involves cutting out the internodal portion of 1-2 yrs old bamboos (A), exposing the inner white portion of the bamboo culm called Leh (B), splitting it lengthwise and putting it over live ember for widening the split (C, D & E), fastening it in the slit of another small sized bamboo referred to as Kampa and again placing over ember (F) and finally rolling it over and even floor (G). The rolled bamboo pieces, called Jo Sing (H), are then placed over smoke for gradual drying and prevention of splitting for a minimum of 3-4 weeks. This forms the inner layer of the milking can, milk churner and food storing boxes. Similarly, the outer layer of the milking can is made out of bigger sized bamboos and referred as Wee (I).

Finally, the flattened pieces of the bamboo are fastened in between a split bamboo of smaller diameter and stitched with the help of an iron poker and cane strips (J & K). The inner and outer layer are then assembled and placed over a wood piece and the circle demarcated from inside (L). The circled wood piece is cut out and nailed to the base (M), similarly the lid of the milking can, called Zho, is made (N) and the finished product is ready to use (O).

The Cheese storing boxes and milk churners are made in a similar manner. The milk churner has an extra wooden plunger, wooden cup with cover fitted to the lid by making a hole in it (Figs. 13-15).

The full process of making three dimensional baskets is depicted in Fig. 16 (A to O). Different types of baskets are being made by the Brokpas for daily use. A type of basket (A to I), involves making of bamboo strips of desired thickness (A), starting the base by interlacing the stripes in a plane weaving pattern (B), securing the base with a twisted bamboo strip (C), bending the extended portion of the strips Table 1—List of items made by the Brokpas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local name</th>
<th>Description of item</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Utility for the brokpas</th>
<th>Type of knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zho</td>
<td>Milking can</td>
<td>Bamboo, wood and cane</td>
<td>Milking utensil</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zopu</td>
<td>Milk churner</td>
<td>Bamboo, wood and cane</td>
<td>Churning butter from milk</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zai</td>
<td>Storing box.</td>
<td>Bamboo, wood and cane</td>
<td>Churpy cheese storing box</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchuk</td>
<td>Churpy separator</td>
<td>Bamboo</td>
<td>Sieving churpy to drain excess whey</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhotyak</td>
<td>Stool with a hook</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Sitting while milking of animals</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ga</td>
<td>Saddle</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Used in yaks for load carrying</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ketong</td>
<td>Drinking glass</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Container for drinking water and wine</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarba</td>
<td>Service spoon</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Separating butter and churpy</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorbu</td>
<td>Tiffin box</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Carrying cooked food</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frokpa</td>
<td>Basket</td>
<td>Bamboo</td>
<td>Load carrying</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchut</td>
<td>Utensil scrubber</td>
<td>Cane</td>
<td>Scrubbing utensils while cleaning</td>
<td>Traditional Craft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 1-11: 1; Zho; 2; Zopu; 3; Zai; 4; Churchuk; 5; Zhotyak; 6; Ga; 7; Ketong; 8; Zarba; 9; Gorbu; 10; Frokpa; and 11; Churchut
Fig. 12—Process of making cylindrical milking can with photos from A-O
(D), weaving it in a three dimensional pattern to a desired length giving gaps towards the base (E) and securing the end of the basket by bending the remaining portion of stripes and tying it with another long bamboo stripe (F). To give the base extra strength, the gaps at the basal 1/3 of the basket is double weaved in a plane weaving pattern (G) and finally the base is secured by bending the stripes and again tying with another long bamboo stripe (H). The finished product is at (I).

Another type of basket Figs. 16 (J to O), is made with a rectangular base (J) and weaved in a different pattern with large gaps in between (K). After securing the end (L) it is again weaved from top to base to give it extra strength (M). Finally, the base is secured properly (N). This is the most common type of baskets used by the Brokpas (O).

The baskets are kept over smoke for preventing it from damage by insects and splitting. The bamboo items get tanned due to smoking over a period of time. Sometimes, instead of smoking, the items are smeared with pine wood oil and placed over low fire and rotated. When the oil gets absorbed into the bamboo stripes sufficiently it is wiped properly or washed to drain out excess oil. These baskets are ready for use and are commonly used for carrying milk and meat products over animal back for trading, storage of edible items, firewood collection etc.

The third type of crafting involves wood curving into items for decoration and daily use. They utilize different types of wood and root nodes for the purpose. The root nodes are beautifully curved into saucers, tiffin boxes (Fig. 17) and masks (Fig. 18). The designs that find expression in the finished products are like self prints. Wood of different types is curved into drinking glasses, service spoons, milking stools, etc. The tools used for crafting are a local Dao (Sword), a Knife and an Iron Poker (Fig. 19).

Discussion

The Brokpa economy is entirely dependent on yak and yak products. The yak milk products are mostly processed and stored in hand crafted utensils and the crafting techniques adopted by them are a complex set of processes embodying Traditional Indigenous Technological Knowledge. The craft item like Zho, Zopu, Zai, Churchuk, etc are indispensable components of the Kitchenette in a Brokpa house and spread the essence of their ethnic identity. The techniques of bamboo cutting, flattening, reshaping, curving, tanning and finishing into different items of daily utility beautifully depicts their inherent aesthetic crafting abilities and ideas. They are making these handicraft items for personal use and for friends and neighbour. They are the preserver of this rich culturally important craftsmanship which has been passed from one generation to the next. Traditional handicrafts of the tribes of India are generally prepared out of resources available in their immediate ecology, where they inhabit, and traditional knowledge applied in the entire process of most of the handicrafts, as per the needs of these people, is inherited from their forefathers. The artisans engage themselves in crafting works only to satisfy the socio-economic need of their community. However, owing to the very low income in crafting works the younger generation shows reluctance to continue with
Fig. 16—Process of making three dimensional Bamboo baskets (A-O)
this traditional art form. Craft items support the livelihood means of the brokpas in ways like processing and storing of milk and milk products for trading which ultimately rotate their economy. This becomes more noteworthy due to the limitations imposed by nature in the high alpine region on cultivable agriculture and availability of cultivable land, leaving them with no other alternative except herding yak for a livelihood.

Crafting for economic gain is almost absent in their society and there is no commercial craft industry in the region. The present day craftsmen face many constrains like non availability of raw materials in their vicinity and inaccessibility to areas with the raw materials. It was also expressed that some of the important varieties of bamboo population of their importance are declining very rapidly. Besides socio-cultural importance of these crafts, other reasons for preserving these traditional art form includes its prospect for being developed into small business enterprises and its subsequent trading. However, in absence of any organized activity in this sector and the products not being adequately remunerative, there is a possible likelihood of the artisans taking up alternate livelihood options, which may involve migration as well and in such a case this age-old activity will die its own death.\(^5\)

At present diversification of their income source is of utmost importance in supplementing their earnings and making their livelihood sustainable. This, however, would require the intervention of Government and Non Government agencies in conservation of the valuable species of the bamboo, wood and cane, giving support to the Craftsmen in procurement of the raw materials without depleting the natural resource base, do value addition and market linking for sale of finished products. Craft Development activities should be considered as part of overall development efforts for a given region, rather than an economic panacea that will provide “instant” alternative employment and income opportunities and if treated as one element of the development of a comprehensive forestry development programme, handicrafts can make an important contribution to the development of the local economy based on environmentally and socially sound principles.\(^6\)

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References