

Traditional handicrafts of *Ang* tribes (*Jarawa*) of Andaman Islands

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Traditional handicrafts of the tribes of India are generally prepared out of resources available in their immediate ecology, where they inhabit. Traditional knowledge applied in the entire process of preparation of most of the handicrafts, as per the needs of these people, is inherited from their forefathers. Handicrafts of the *Ang* (*Jarawa*), hunter-gatherer tribes of the South and Middle Andaman Islands and the processes involved in preparation of such items have been discussed in the paper. Their hunting-gathering implements, the only handicrafts available with this foraging tribe not only reveal the eco-friendly nature of this small population, these also establish their astonishing capacity of intimate observation with regard to the nature and characters of surrounding flora and fauna those are most suitable in producing the handicrafts essential for survival against many odds. These further indicate their intelligent, aesthetic sense as well as innovative mind of the population, who remained in complete isolation till recent past. TK in respect of such a population living in the Bay Islands, who identify themselves as *Ang* tribes and called by the outsiders as the *Jarawa* tribes is discussed here.

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Traditional knowledge (TK) is the result of cumulative experience of a community about the relationship of living organisms with one another and also with their environment and immediate resource areas. This is learnt through intimate observation of the members of a society in their day to day life. Such knowledge is cumulated over the centuries and usually transmitted from one generation to another. Since, it is cumulated on the basis of every day experience of interactions with the environment it is dynamic in nature. TK gets constantly enriched through fresh experiences and close observations of the members of a community while negotiating with the challenges posed by their environment. During the last two decades, different international and national organizations have shown much concern about the rapidly decaying TK of various populations, especially those who still recent past lived out side the realm of impact of urbanization and industrialization, but now are being exposed to such forces. The organizations like the UN, WIP, World Bank, ILO urged the need of preservation and protection of such knowledge. India comprising diverse ethnic and religious groups, spread over varied ecological settings is known for her rich cultural heritage. Many of the communities living in the villages away from the towns and cities still apply their traditional knowledge in day to day activities to a considerable

extent. The population living in close association with their immediate ecology develops skill of close observation in understanding the behaviour of the nature. Such understanding results in cultivating knowledge that helps them towards their survival.

Traditional knowledge and wisdom of a group of people are interwoven in their way of life. These intangible aspects of culture vary from one ecology to another as the people inhabiting such areas differ in their nature of livelihood, associated with their immediate ecological niches. Therefore, more a society depends on a particular ecology devoid of any kind of relatively advanced technological external influences through generations; greater is the persistence of TK that helps in continuation of their specific culture. TK in respect of such a population living in the Bay Islands, who identify themselves as *Ang* tribes and called by the outsiders as the *Jarawa* tribes is discussed here.

The *Ang* (*Jarawa*) are a classical hunter-gatherer tribes of India inhabiting the Middle and South Andaman Islands in 635 sq km dense forests declared as reserved area¹. They had a population of 266 heads in the year 2003². This *negrito* tribe is semi-nomadic and have 3 territorial groups in respect of the use of natural resources. However, these three territorial groups have marital relations among themselves. The west coast touching South and Middle Andaman is

also at their disposal for foraging purposes. They are considered to be the original inhabitants of these islands along with the other *negrito* tribes the *Great Andamanese*. Till 1997, the *Ang* avoided any interactions with the non-*Angs* migrant populations, who have settled down in the vicinity of their habitats in different phases³. The *Ang* entirely depend on the forest and marine resources for their survival. Very little is known to the outsiders about their cultural heritage. In fact, they were branded as 'hostile' by the non-*Angs* as no one was allowed to enter their resource areas without an encounter.

Methodology

Survey conducted during 1985-2003, many of their activities that were the testimony of their astonishing standard of TK in all spheres, including preparation of handicrafts essential for persistence of their foraging way of life were noticed. The *Ang*, survived over thousand of years on the hunting-gathering activities. For this act, they had to prepare suitable implements out of the resources available primarily in the forest. This naturally demanded a thorough knowledge about the utilitarian properties and characteristics of the plants at the first instance. Not that all plants are suitable for making strong bow or long arrow. Their ancestors must have learnt the nature of the plants through prolonged observations. Shaping and designing hunting-gathering implements to make them more effective, speak about their levels of intelligence, imagination and excellence in skill, craftsmanship and creative mind.

Enumerations

Hunting Implements

The most important implements of hunting are the bow, arrow and spear. The members of the society have a clear knowledge about the plants and their availability in the territory; those are most suitable for making these artifacts.

Bow (*Aao*)

A bow is made by the male members of hard, close-grained and elastic *chooi* (*Sageraca elliptica* Hook. f. & Thoms.) stem. An unstring bow measures about 160 cm in length, while a small bow used by the children is about 90 cm long. To facilitate maximum ejection, both dorsal and ventral sides of the bow are kept convex. In order to provide a firm grip at the moment of shooting, a transverse ridge bulging in the middle of the ventral side of the bow is

kept and with the help of an indigenous knife (*toada*) tapers it on both sides from the middle towards the end (Fig. 10). To form the shoulders that are essential to tie the bow string firmly, notches are cut with the knife at each end on both sides from the solid stem. Occasionally, they decorate bows with oblique, cross-hatched patterns on the vertical side. The bow string is made of long strip of bark fiber known as *wetho* (*Ficus scandens* Roxb.). The strip of the bark is twisted and, through out its length, it is spirally wound around a thinner strip. One end of the string is doubled over to form a loop; the other end of the bow string is tied to the lower end of the bow. Pig blood mixed with fat is used to give every bow a permanent reddish colour (Fig. 1).

Arrow (*Patho*)

Different types of arrows are used for hunting wild boar, monitor lizard, turtle and also for defense. Stem of *tulu* (*Areca triandra* Roxb.) is used for making the shaft of a short sized arrow, while a longer shaft is prepared from the stem of *Murraya paniculata* (Linn.) Jack. The same stem is used for making a spear. The average length of a simplest type of arrow is about 100 cm. One end of the shaft gradually tapers to a sharp point, while a notch is made at the other end to rest it on the bow-string.

Arrow with wooden head

This type of arrow has two parts; a bamboo shaft and a wooden head. Usually, the shaft is about 90 cm long. In order to prevent any chance of split in the shaft, it is cut just below a node near the end. At this end a 'U' shaped notch is cut with the help of a knife, so that it may properly rests on the bow string. The front of the shaft is hollowed with great skill, into which the wooden head is fixed. The shaft is a long piece of *Areca* stem that tapers from the middle towards the ends. One end of the head is blunt and serves as a tang. The average length of the head, excluding the tang and its average diameter of the middle are 33 cm and one cm, respectively. Sometimes the arrow heads are elongated and leaf shaped with a mid rib between the flat margins. In some cases, the heads tapers towards the ends from the middle. The part, where the head is received by the hollow portion of the shaft is made rough and some kind of grip is prepared by scratching with a sharp knife. To avoid detachment, the joint is strengthened by tying the string several times over it. The string is prepared out of the fiber of a climber, called *wiibo*. The rough surface prevents displacement

of threads. Occasionally, the string is made colourful wrapping it with the yellow skin of orchids. To make the string stronger and more durable bee wax is applied on it (Fig. 2).

Arrow with iron head

A simple type of iron head arrow used by the men for fishing in low tide has 3 parts, a fore shaft of areca stem, a bamboo shaft and an iron head made of a stout piece of iron rod of about 30 cm in length (Fig. 14). The iron tapers to a sharp point projecting outwards with a barb. Some portion of the fore shaft is obliquely scrapped longitudinally, against which the bent part of the iron head is placed. The two are formally bound together by bark thread leaving the sharp bent end of the iron head uncovered, which serves as a barb. The other end of the fore shaft is inserted in to the bamboo shaft. It is about 60 cm long. Here too, the joint is bound tightly with bark thread (Fig. 3). A barb less arrow with flat iron head has a shaft made either of bamboo or red cane. Its average length is 80 cm. The butt end of the shaft is notched to receive the bow string. One end of the shaft is split longitudinally for the insertion of the tang of the iron head and the joint is bound by bark thread or with the fiber of climber *wiibo*. Iron heads may be elongated leaf-like, oval shaped or almost a reverse triangular shape. The length of the head may from 10-15 cm (Fig. 4).

Harpoon arrow

A harpoon arrow is a remarkable innovation by the ancestors of the *Ang*. It has 3 parts, a shaft, fore shaft and an iron head. The shaft is made of red cane and is about 60 cm long while the fore shaft is tapered a little towards the end, so that it can fit in to the shaft. Just a little above this end, two strong cords, called *chogol* made of bark, are fastened to the fore shaft. The iron head termed as *tootechale* is sharp in both sides and is about 15 cm long. As in case of other iron head arrows the sharp ends are made with controlled hammering on both the sides with out tempering in fire. Just above the tang of the iron head a small hole is made. The free ends of the cords of the fore shaft are fastened to the shaft of the arrow (Fig. 5). The primary objective of its innovation was to prevent easy escape of an injured animal, which is so valued to them.

The ancestors of the *Ang* and other 3 *Negrito* populations of the Andaman Islands, inhabited the dense tropical forest through generations. Except the Indian wild boar (*Sus scrofa andamanensis* Blyth.) no

other big animal was available. Hunting in the dense forest and collecting the injured animal was not very easy. The injured animal had the scope to hide in the deep forest escaping the sight of the hunter. In order to prevent loss of such precious hunt, they must have applied their technical, innovative and imaginative bent of mind to prepare such a unique implement. Once a boar is shot and partially injured with this type of harpoon arrow, the barbs of the iron head get firmly struck on the body of the animal. In great pain, the injured boar would try to run away in the deep forest. While running, the long main shaft gets struck in the bush, bamboo groves and other plants. As a result of the jerk the shaft gets detached from the iron head fixed in the fore shaft and entangled in the plants, bamboo that prevents easy escape of the hapless animal.

Making of an iron head arrow is a long process. It is not exactly known since when the *Ang* learnt the use of iron in making their hunting implements. Many scholars presume that all the 4 *Negrito* tribes of Andaman Islands used to obtain iron from the ship wreckages, which accidentally got grounded near their islands and subsequently abandoned. Iron is given shape with the help of chisel and hammer without tempering it. Prior to availability of iron hammer and chisel, how they used to shape the iron arrow heads is a matter of conjecture. The *Sentinelese* of the North Sentinel Island, who practically have no contact with the outsiders shape iron heads of different types like *Ang*. It may not be totally wrong to assume that heavy stones served as hammer. The iron head is sharpened on a piece of stone.

Gathering implements

Wooden bucket (*uhuo*) and the cane basket (*taija*) are the most common crafts used for the collection of food items.

Bucket

The wooden buckets are used for keeping honey, pork, etc. and also for carrying other articles while on move (Fig. 6). A bucket is made out of a solid block of soft *thaad* stem (*Pajanelia longifolia* K. Schum.) scooped with some chisel like implement (Fig. 12). The bark is peeled out and the outer surface of the bucket is then slightly charred over fire. It is then waxed from outside as well as inside. The dimensions of an average small-sized bucket are 17 cm height and 17 cm diameter, while those of the big ones are 40 cm and 38 cm, respectively. The buckets are placed inside a frame made of cane which holds it from the

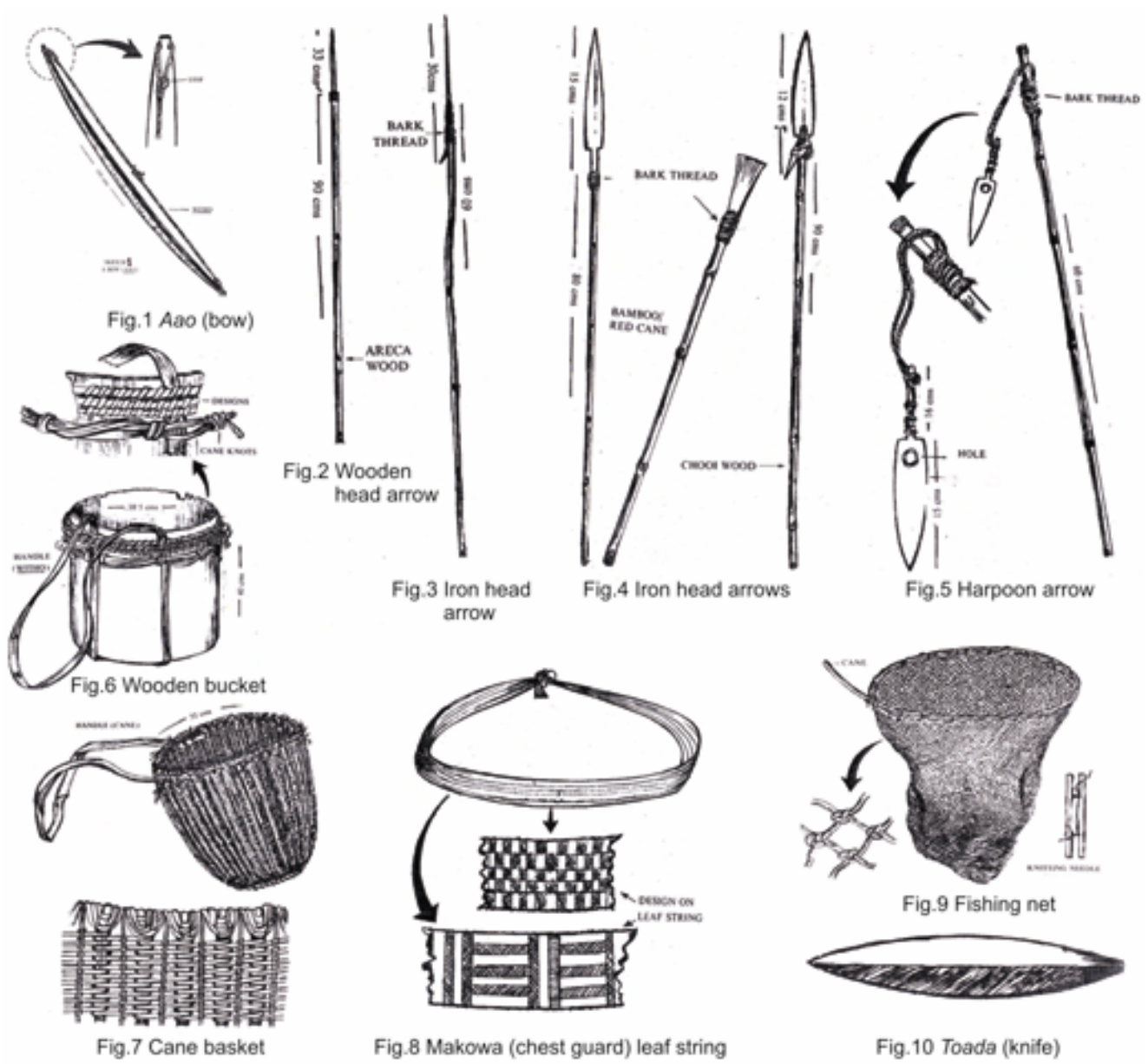


Fig.11 Chest guard



Fig.12 Scooping to prepare wooden bucket



Fig.13 Finishing touch to wooden bucket



Fig.14 Fishing with iron head arrow, bow & basket

bottom as well as the outside. A strip of cane is also fastened around the bucket as a handle, called *witho*. A bucket is sometimes nicely designed with fine vertical cane strips, which are tied at the cane ring near the mouth and the bottom (Fig. 13).

Basket

While moving for gathering food, the members of *Ang* community always carry a basket made of cane on their back. The circular rim of an averaged sized basket is about 32 cm in diameter. It is made of thick strips of red cane (*Korthalsia rogersii* Becc.). The bottom is conical and the frame is made of strips of *malai* cane (*Calamus baratangensis* Renuka & T.T. Vijayakumaran). Thinner, flexible cane strips (wefts) are closely wrapped around this frame. The ends of the wraps are reduced to the cane-strips and are tied to the rim. Both male and female are expert in weaving basket (Fig. 7).

Chest guard (*kekar*)

The *Ang* when go for either hunting or for moving in forest use a round shaped chest guard prepared out of a tree, *tahat* (*Sterculia villosa* Roxb.). A *kekar* has double folds of the bark, the two ends of which are stitched with bark threads (Fig 11). A *kekar* not only protects the chest from any sudden, unanticipated enemy attack, it also provides space within folds for keeping knife, arrow heads and some other small items of personal use. Like a bow, a *kekar* is sometimes decorated with simple geometrical zigzag designs etched with a sharp knife. The designs are also coloured with a dye, extracted from the stem juice of a plant, *Oro* (*Myristica andamanica* Hook. f.). In addition to this, occasionally beautifully designed strips of orchid leaves are tied on the top and bottom edges of a *kekar* (Fig. 8).

Fishing net (*Botho*)

A fishing hand net is generally used by the ladies for fishing during low tide and also sometimes to carry small items. It is made of a long and thin branch of tree bend to form a circle about 3 cm in diameter and the ends crossing each other are tied, while one end of the stick or cane is left long about 20 cm to form a handle. Fishing nets are knitted from strings prepared from bark or climber. Now a days, nylon threads that come as drift material on the sea shore is used. The thread is wound around with a small bamboo knitting needle. The knots used are similar to the fisherman's knot. To make the bark thread

lasting, wax is rubbed on it. A net is usually knitted by the ladies (Fig. 9).

Discussion

Description of the hunting-gathering implements of *Ang* establishes the astonishing creative excellences of this small community. Making of different types of arrows speaks the excellent skill and craftsmanship of the *Ang* males. The ancestors of this small community with their analytical bent of mind, intimate observations on the surrounding forest, could identify the special properties of different plants available in their territory and accordingly made best use of these in preparing weapons for different purposes. The iron heads with barbs or the detachable harpoon arrow are the astonishing innovation of their ancestors. The present generation of *Ang* inherited such traditional knowledge. It is their foraging way of life that has made almost all *Ang* males to apply this traditional knowledge and learn the techniques and develop skill in preparation of both simple and complex types of arrows. Engraving geometrical designs on the bows also indicates not only their artistic skill, but also their affectionate attachment to these weapons, which no doubts are intimately associated with their foraging way of life, being the principal objects of pursuing livelihood and also survival against all odds.

It has been observed that the *Ang* do not cut stem or peel bark more than their actual requirement for preparation of crafts. For example while making a *kekar*, they measure the exact requirement and peel off only that much bark and allow the tree to recover. Like wise, when they make a bow, they cut just what is required. The forefathers of this small community were well aware that any uncontrolled use of their resources would definitely cause hardship in their hunting-gathering pursuits. Therefore, they never developed the practice of total destruction of the resources for making their very essential implements, instead have evolved as an excellent eco-friendly community.

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