

Traditional woodcraft, *Jambili Athon* of the *Karbis*

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Jambili Athon is an extraordinary woodcraft of the *Karbis*, made entirely from *Bengwoi ke-er* (*Wrightia coccinea* Sims. (Apocynaceae), whose origin and making of the craft is strictly based on legends. It consists of a central axis and a whorl of four branches, all with beautiful carvings on it and the apices are perched with different species of birds. *Jambili Athon* is exhibited during socio-religio-cultural festival, *Chomkan*, during crowning ceremony of social chief, the *Lindokpo* and also to honour great persons. *Jambili Athon* has no parallel with any crafts or symbols of other tribes of Northeast India and is claimed as the symbol of pride and cultural identity by *Karbis*. It covers the philosophy of life & death, social institutions and religious practices of the people. Further, *Jambili Athon* is often used in logos of many institutions and organizations in Karbi Anglong and also as designs on textiles. A miniature *Jambili Athon* is usually kept as an artifact in almost every household.

Keywords: Karbi tribe, Woodcraft, *Jambili Athon*, *Wrightia coccinea*, *Chomkan*, Traditional craft
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The *Karbis* represents one of the prominent tribes of Northeast India and possess a distinct traditions and culture. However, like their Northeast tribes, the *Karbis* are also Mongoloid in origin and speak a local dialect, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman particularly *Kuki-Chin* sub-group of languages. Further, they are believed to have migrated from the Kuki-Chin area in and around Chindwin river valley in western Myanmar¹⁻⁴. Currently, the *Karbis* are scheduled tribe in Assam state with highest concentration in the two hill districts namely, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. They are largely agrarian and practice *jhum* in the hills and wet cultivation in the plains. Socially, they are divided into five exogamous clans referred as *Kur* namely, *Tungjang*, *Ejang*, *Lijang*, *Hanjang* and *Kronjang*. Each clan is further subdivided into sections and groups. Karbi Anglong district comprises of two detached parts, the eastern part, and the western part also referred as Hamren sub-division. The latter part is traditionally divided into 3 regions known as *Rongbong* namely, *Rongkhang*, *Chinthong* and *Amri rongbong*. Each *rongbong* has a social institution or parliament headed by social dignitaries, called *Pinpo*. The *rongbong* is further divided into *longri* (block, region), which comprises of a few villages and another dignitary the *Habe*, duly appointed by the Chief, the *Lindokpo* is in-charge of a *longri*. For all these, Hamren sub-

divisional area is considered as the seat of *Karbi* culture because such demarcation and institution do not exist in the eastern part of the district. At village level, the *Rong Sarthe* (village headman) looks after the customs, traditions and well as administrative matters.

Art and craft occupy a prominent place in the socio-cultural life of the *Karbis*. Women are expert weavers and make dresses adorned with attractive designs of flora, fauna and other objects. Men are highly acclaimed for their expertise in bamboo, cane and woodcrafts. The most honoured craft among the *Karbis*, however, is the unique woodcraft, known as *Jambili Athon*. The craft is exhibited during the festival, called *Chomkan* and during special occasions⁵⁻⁸. *Chomkan* is the most important and expensive festival among the *Karbis*. On this occasion, expert weaver called, *Lunsepi* with her divinity invite the souls of the deceased to the earth and enable the living members of the family to pay their respect. Effigies of the deceased members are made and people offer *hor alank* (rice beer) and sacrifice fowls, pigs and goats in their honour^{1,3,5,9}. General information regarding *Jambili Athon* was collected from elderly and learned persons living in rural and urban areas of Karbi Anglong district. Legends pertaining to origin, craft making and its position in *Karbi* society were recorded from experts

on *Jambili Athon*. The *Chomkan* festival at Tengkeria Lankso of Hamren sub-division and Hambong Inghi village, Howraghat was attended to collect information on *Jambili Athon* viz. variation, origin and its significance in the socio-religio-cultural life of the *Karbis*. Information collected from various sources was confirmed from *pinpo* (social dignitaries) of social institutions and other learned persons.

Results

Jambili Athon is the most honoured woodcraft and symbol among the *Karbis*. The craft is entirely made from the wood of *Bengvoi Ke-er* (*Wrightia coccinea* Sims., Apocynaceae)(Fig. 1), its origin and making of the craft is strictly based on legends. According to customary laws, *Jambili Athon* is made by skilled craftsman referred as *Baroi*. The craft is about 4.12 m in height and consists of large central axis, called *Athon pi* (*athon*: branch; *pi*: large/main) and a whorl of four small branches, called *Aro Athon* (*aro*: branchlet /small). The central axis tops above the four lateral branches. At the apex of the central axis is articulated a local bird known as *Vojaru* (Racket-tailed drongo); to the apices of lateral branches are fixed another local bird, named *Vorale* (Spangled Drongo). Another local bird, *Voleng cherat* (Grey-Capped Pygmy woodpecker) is perched on the main axis just below each lateral branch (Fig. 7). Seeds of *Chuselok* (*Abrus pectoriosus* L., Fabaceae) are fixed to the head of birds to resemble eyes. All parts of the craft, except a few feet of the lower part of central axis have beautiful carvings namely, *along-aling* (mortar), *roi* (bracelets), *tibuk* (pot), *lankdung* (banana inflorescence), *hanthu angrong* (inflorescence of *Gnetum gnemon* L.), *bong amu* (seed of bottle gourd), *hongthor* and *horbong* (gourd shell) (Fig. 8). Also, it is adorned with *lek* (beads) namely, *leksobai* (cowries), *lektara angjok* (shoot of *Alpinia nigra* (Gaertn.) Butt., Zingiberaceae), *leklirbon*, and *leklartabon*; and objects such as *luji* (looking glass) and *ingthi* (combs). Carvings and ornaments however are not uniform in all *Jambili Athon*. Further, the carving of *horbong* is always specified at the apex of central axis, while *hanthu angrong* is specified at the apex of the lateral branch and sometimes on the central axis as well. The *hongthor* represents the traditional waiting shed erected during marriage and crowning of social chief. On the occasion, a *hongthor* is erected by the road side or on the bank of river, often with beautiful carvings on the posts and certain rituals are performed in the shed.

Jambili Athon is painted with a black dye, extracted from *so-ik*, *kung-kung* (*Croton caudatus* Wall., Euphorbiaceae). Fresh twigs of the plant are put to fire, which in turn produce boiling sap in the other end. The sap is collected in a container, which turns black on cooling. Mustard oil is added to the sap, properly mixed and painted uniformly on the woodcraft. On drying, it is again rubbed with a soft clean cloth to give a shiny black colour. The origin and making of *Jambili athon* is strictly based on legends. *Jambili Athon* was first exhibited at a *Chomkan* in a village under *Chinthong rongbong*. Highly pleased and taken aback by the beauty of the craft, social dignitaries of the region decided to keep the craft with them and seized the same. To legitimate their act, they made a declaration that common *Karbis* are not entitled to keep such a precious craft often dubbed as *ser* (gold). The practice of exhibiting *Jambili Athon* during *Chomkan* continued since then (Figs. 4,5). Selection of *Bengvoi ke-er* for the craft is a tedious and difficult task. As per legend, a *bengvoi* tree with 3 trunks/boles is the right choice and the *Jambili Athon* should be made from the middle trunk.

Jambili Athon carries invaluable philosophical message to the *Karbis*. It covers the philosophy of life and death and social institutions and religious practices of the people. The *Karbis* regard the *Vojaru* as the king of the birds, who is always followed by other birds traditionally referred as *atoi-ani* (followers) and are compared to ministers and soldiers. The *Vojaru* is portrayed as the *Karbi* king, who protects his people symbolized by smaller birds and enjoys peaceful co-existence among themselves in their independent places reflected by 5 branches⁶⁻⁸. The woodpecker even collects food for the *Vojaru* (king). It is believed that *Vojaru* knows the languages of all the birds and can foretell the coming of danger⁸. It is also believed that 5 branches of the *Jambili Athon* referred to the five clans of the *Karbis* were not substantiated by experts during field study. Further, legends relating to the origin of the craft also do not reflect such relationship. Probably, a rare parallel of 5 clans with 5 branches (including central axis) of *Jambili Athon* have motivated a section of *Karbi* elders to put forth such view. Two social groups have been recognized particularly among the *Karbis* of *Amri rongbong* based on *Rong Arnam*, a local deity they worship – the *Nongkirla* and *Durong* groups. This grouping is reflected in the *Jambili Athon* as well. The *Jambili Athon* of the *Durong* group is



Fig.1 Bengvoi ke-er (*Wrightia coccinea* Sims)



Fig.2 Jambili Athon craft of the Karbis



Fig.3 Jambili Athon of Habipi Longri



Fig.4 Traditional shield dance



Fig.5 Traditional drums



Fig.6 Design of Jambili Athon on posts



Fig.7 Parts of Jambili Athon - *Vojaru*, *Aro athon* (whorl of branches), *Vorale*

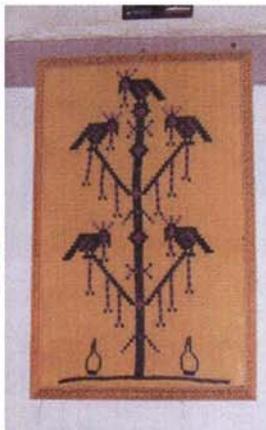


Fig.8 Carvings on Jambili Athon

Fig.9 Jambili Athon as wall hangings

decorated with *lek* including red colour and during *Chomkan*, the craft is directly planted on the ground. Its *Nongkirla* counterpart however, have the craft adorned with *lek* of varied colours except red and the craft is inserted into a bamboo tube called *apongkroi*, the latter of which is planted on the ground. For historical reasons, *Jambili Athon* of *Habipi longri* (region, block) has the bird *Maino* (Mynah) in all the branches (Figs. 2, 3). The philosophical meaning is that *Maino* has no *atoi-ani* (followers) like *Vojaru*. It is reported that this honour (*Maino*) is bestowed only to the *Karbi* traditional king, the *Ronghang Lindokpo*, who always represents the *Habipi longri*.

Jambili Athon is exhibited during the most important and extravagant festival of *Karbis*, the *Chomkan*. On the occasion, *Klensarpo* rotates the *Jambili Athon* according to the traditional beats of drums, while his deputy, *Klengdun* rotates the *apongkroi*. The woodcraft is exhibited from morning till evening, which coincides with the last day of the festival, called *Kanpi*. People perform the traditional *Chong Chingnang* (the Shield dance) according to the beats of drums (Figs. 4 & 5). Young boys and girls make merry and perform the traditional *Chomkan* dance, *Nimso Kerung* in the rhythms of folk songs. At the base of *Jambili Athon*, expert singer, the *Lunsepi* sing the folk songs relating to the origin of the craft. A pair of *Chong-Nok* (shield and sword) is also kept at the base of the woodcraft. *Jambili Athon* is also exhibited during crowning ceremony of new traditional chief, the *Lindokpo*. Experts play traditional drums producing characteristic beats of the occasion. Respected persons are often welcomed with *Jambili Athon*. Various stages of *Chomkan*, as well as other socio-religious occasions are indicated by varying the beats of drums and played by experts, known as *Duhuidi*.

In a *Karbi* society, *Jambili Athon* is the highest honour bestowed to a person. As per customary laws, only *baroi*, *habe* and *pino* are entitled to keep the woodcraft in their houses. However, when situation arises intending parties can hire the craft for exhibition in *Chomkan* or other important occasions. Today however, due to profound cultural value attached to *Jambili Athon*, people prefer to keep a set of the craft in every village particularly in eastern part of the district. But in Hamren sub-division, the traditional practice is still followed. Due to invaluable socio-religio-cultural significance, *Jambili Athon* is often used as design on textiles and logo. Further, a

miniature *Jambili Athon* is usually kept as artifact in every household (Fig. 9) and is inscribed on the posts (Fig. 6).

Discussion

Jambili Athon not only reflects the skill and creativity of the craftsman, *Kleng Kathar* in particular and the *Karbi* community in general, but also as an example of invaluable traditional knowledge. The woodcraft is traditional to the *Karbis* and is also the highest honour bestowed to a person. Study of this type will be able to throw some light on the condition of primitive *Karbi* society and pattern of settlements, particularly when the *Karbis* have no written history of their own. Unlike the totem poles of North American Indians, which have carvings of Gods they worship, figures of animals or their ancestors, the *Jambili Athon* of the *Karbis*, primarily reflects skill and creativity of the people. *Vojaru* is the traditional bird of the *Karbis* and its *ane* (tail) is used as headgear; *hanthu* is a common vegetable and also used in rituals; *lankdung* (banana inflorescence) is a common vegetable; *lek* and *roi* constitutes regular ornaments; *long* is used for pounding paddy; *horbong* is used for offering *horlank* during any rituals; *hongthor* is the traditional waiting shed often with beautiful carvings on the posts. As of now, *Jambili Athon* remains exclusive to the *Karbis* and will continue to uphold the symbol of pride and cultural identity of the people for years to come.

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