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 Myanmar. 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 occasions. 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. 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 Tengkera 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 Vorale (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 pectorious 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-along (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, lekobai (cowries), lektara angjok (shoot of Alpinia nigra (Gaertn.) Butt., Zingiberaceae), leklirbon, and leklaratab; 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 Vorale 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 Vorale 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 Vorale (king). It is believed that Vorale 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
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 horka during any rituals; honthor 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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