Hor, the traditional alcoholic beverage of Karbi tribe in Assam

Robindra Teron
Department of Botany, Diphu Government College, P.O. Diphu
Karbi Anglong- 782 462, Assam, India
E-mail : robindra_teron@yahoo.co.in ; robin_kongkat@rediffmail.com
Received 23 January 2006; Accepted 22 May 2006

Abstract
The Karbis have an age old tradition of preparing Hor Alank (rice beer) by fermenting cooked rice with locally prepared yeast culture called Thap and distilling the alcohol called Hor Arak from the beer. Thap is traditionally prepared from leaves of Croton joufra Roxb. and uncooked rice. Highly concentrated alcohol in small quantities has been used among rural masses to cure dysentery, pharyngitis and cholera; while hor alank is used as preservative and for flavouring dried fish (manthu). The paper describes the indigenous method of preparing the beverage, various substitutes and adulterants used for the preparation of thap and its uses. The traditional Still called Bhot as well as improved Still have also been described in detail.

Keywords : Karbi tribe, Karbi Anglong, Assam, Traditional beverage, Alcoholic beverage, Hor alank, Hor arak, Thap, Rice, Croton joufra, Amomum corynostachyum, Acacia pennata, Bhot, Still, Substitute, Adulterant.

IPC code: Int. cl.8 — C12C 5/000, C12C 11/000, C12G 3/000, A23L 1/22, A61K 36/00

Introduction
The Karbis having distinct identity and culture represent one of the major hill tribes of North-East India. They are settled in all the sister states of North-East but at present they are largely concentrated in two hill districts of Assam, viz. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills only. The region is largely mountainous with dense forests and rough terrains and therefore, ethnobotanically least explored. The Karbis are Mongoloid in origin and speak a local dialect ‘Karbi’, a Tibeto-Burmesse, more particularly the Kuki-chin sub-group of languages1. Opinions of learned and elderly persons and excerpts from folklores suggest that the Karbis have migrated from the Kuki-chin area in and around the Chindwin river valley in western Myanmar. The Karbis are basically hill tribe and their main agriculture is still the traditional Jhum, at least in the hills.

Hor or alcoholic beverage (hor-alcohol) is an integral part of the socio-cultural life of the Karbis. Hor Alank is rice beer produced by fermentation of cooked rice with locally prepared yeast culture called Thap, while alcohol distilled from Horlank is called Hor Arak. Horlank is traditionally used during Adam Asar (traditional marriage) and Seh Karkli (Worships). Arak is used in all social occasions including death ceremonies; it is also offered to guests as a mark of respect. However, both forms of beverages are consumed as refreshing drink.

There are a few reports related to use of beverage by the Karbis during worship, marriage and death ceremonies and use of leaves of marthu (Croton joufra) in the preparation of thap2-4. These reports however have not highlighted details of the preparation of thap and plants used in it, substrates for fermentation and of the apparatus used for distillation. The present paper is based on first hand knowledge collected during survey of rural villages of Karbi Anglong district.

Materials and Methods
A study was undertaken during 2003-2005 to document local knowledge related to preparation of this traditional beverage by the Karbi tribe of Assam. Village elders of rural areas were requested to share the knowledge on various aspects of the topic such as fermentation of rice, other substrates, preparation of yeast culture and plants used in it, distillation of alcohol from rice beer and traditional uses of beverage and its implications on the socio-culture of the Karbis. Information collected was confirmed from learned and elderly persons including women who are often engaged in the preparation of yeast culture. Plants used in the preparation of yeast medium and plant adulterants used were collected from field, dried, poisoned and mounted on herbarium sheets as per
standard process. Mounted specimens were deposited in the Herbarium of Botany Department, Diphu Govt. College, Diphu. Various steps involved in the preparation of traditional beverage, hor are as follows:

**Preparation of Thap**

*Thap* is traditionally prepared from leaves of *Marthu* (*Croton joufra*, Fig.1) and water-soaked rice. They are pounded into fine powder in mortar with pestle, respectively called *Long* and *Lengpum*. To the sticky powdered mass some amount of previously prepared *thap* called *Thap Aphi* is mixed and the mixture is made into round, flat cakes. The cakes are dried in the sun for 2-5 days depending on the prevailing temperature and kept near a fire place for future use (Fig.2). *Thap* is reported to be effective up to twelve months.

Leaves of *Ku-eng* (*Amomum corynostachyum* Wall., Fig.3) and bark of *Themra* (*Acacia pennata* Willd., Fig.4) are used as substitutes for *C. joufra*. Fresh mixture of powdered rice and *C. joufra* acts as medium; *Thap aphi* is equivalent to yeast spawn and the drying period coincide with the active growth of yeast cells in the medium. Yeast cells remain dormant during storage period and the same when mixed with cooked rice become active again and bring about fermentation. It is reported that *Hor* prepared from *A. corynostachyum* based *Thap* is most favoured as it is fragrant, cooling and refreshing.

*Thap* has a large bearing on the social life of the *Karbis*. It is believed that *Thap aphi* (yeast spawn) is God gifted; a Karbi woman was told in her dream to make *Thap* from leaves of *Marthu* and uncooked rice using the faecal matter of a bird locally known as *Vokongching* as yeast spawn and the *Horlank* produced as a result of fermentation be used during marriage and worship. For historical reasons women belonging to the section *Bey-Ronghang* of sub-clan *Bey* and clan *Hanjang*, preparation of *Thap* is considered a taboo.
Distillation of Hor

*Hor* is prepared by fermenting cooked rice with locally prepared yeast culture called *thap*. Generally, rice of inferior quality is cooked and spread on specially prepared bamboo mat called *Antar*. The latter is never used for other purpose. Cooked rice is then broken into fine grains and allowed to cool. An adequate quantity of powdered *thap* is thoroughly mixed with rice and the mixture is stored in *Tebuk* (pot) or *pho-le* (cooking utensil) for three days during summer and up to four days during winter, for fermentation. For the collection of beer a pit is usually made at the center where a cylindrical sieve made from bamboo splits called *Hengru* is placed and *horlank* is retrieved with gourd shell called *Lankjak*. The fermented rice excluding the beer before distillation is called *Bechurang*. After the allotted period of fermentation, an adequate quantity of water is added, mixed thoroughly and allowed to remain for one more night. This act of addition of water is called *Hor Kangthur*. The next day *hor arak* (alcohol) is distilled from it. In the beginning a very crude form of Still/ apparatus called *Bhot* (Fig.5) was employed for distillation. It consist of an earthen pot with swollen base and a long neck where fermented rice is placed over another earthen pot referred as *Bhot* (Fig. 5 inset) with two lateral nozzles as outlets and whose mouth is tightly fitted to the mouth of the long-necked pot. Two bamboo tubes called *Charang* are connected to the nozzles of the *Bhot* which separately leads to earthen pots which are placed on condensers in the form of saucers filled with cold water.

*Charang* is usually made from *Tereng* [*Neohouzeaua dullooa* (Gamble) A. Camus] or *Kaipho* (*Dendrocalamus hamiltonii* Nees & Arn.) and consist of one or two internodes. The gaps between joints of compartments of the Still are sealed with a mixture of *bechurang* and *phek-eh*. On heating, alcohol forms vapour, passes through the perforated base of *pho-le chekrak* and reaches the cool base of the condenser where it becomes liquid and falls back on the *chobak*. The liquified alcohol passes through the outlet and is then collected through the *charang* (side tube). It is reported that when about 40 grams of *thap* is added to 5 kg of rice, about 5.5 litres of alcohol can be extracted. The fermented rice after distillation is now called *hor sera* (*sera*: left over). The latter is used as feed for pigs and sometimes as fish attractant. It is, however, difficult to trace the origin of the primitive Still, *Bhot* as well as the improved Still, but the latter is of common

On heating the alcohol component being volatile form vapour and reaches the *Bhot* which is collected as liquid in earthen pots through the two *charang*. Completion of distillation is judged by the hardness of *bechurang* placed on the *Bhot* which of course requires a great deal of experience.

*Bhot*, today is an abandoned and is replaced by an improved Still (Fig.6). This consist of three components—the lower one is a metallic utensil which contains the fermented rice; the middle part is an earthen pot with perforated base called *Pho-le chekrak* (*pho-le*: cooking utensil; *chekrak*: perforated) and contains a small wooden bowl with tubular outlets called *Chobak* (Fig.7) to which the side tube *charang* is fitted. The *charang* in this case consists of a single internode and a node at one end. The upper part is actually a condenser in the form of metalled saucer filled with cold water. The gaps between components of the Still are sealed with a mixture of *bechurang* and *phek-eh*. On heating, alcohol forms vapour, passes through the perforated base of *pho-le chekrak* and reaches the cool base of the condenser where it becomes liquid and falls back on the *chobak*. The liquified alcohol passes through the outlet and is then collected through the *charang* (side tube). It is reported that when about 40 grams of *thap* is added to 5 kg of rice, about 5.5 litres of alcohol can be extracted. The fermented rice after distillation is now called *hor sera* (*sera*: left over). The latter is used as feed for pigs and sometimes as fish attractant. It is, however, difficult to trace the origin of the primitive Still, *Bhot* as well as the improved Still, but the latter is of common
use among various tribes of Karbi Anglong district.

Rice being hard to come by, the hill Karbis use other substrates such as Krem-mal or malu (Eleusine corocana Gaertn.), ripe banana, jackfruit and Thothis Dumps (Citrus volgiris Schrad.) for preparing hor. In this regard fermentation with C. vulgaris is worth mentioning. An appropriate hole is made on the fruit while it is still attached to the plant. Inner pericarp is scooped and to it adequate quantity of thap is added and mixed properly. The hole is then sealed with the part of the fruit removed earlier and allowed to remain for three nights. On the fourth day the fruit is detached from the plant and the beer so formed is collected and consumed. Generally, distillation in this case is not carried out.

**Substitutes and adulterants**

For quick money a number of plants and organic or inorganic chemicals are used as adulterants either to enhance the production of alcohol or to give stronger taste. A few worth mentioning are leaves of phlek-ik (Clerodendrum viscosum Vent.), Hanso (Zingiber officinale Rosc.), Ingki-an (Ricinus communis Linn.), Sok aphi (Cymbopogon citratus (DC.) Stapf), Parokjangphong (Ananas comosus (Linn.) Merr.) Hepisokran(Solanum indicum Linn.) and Jangphong (Artocarpus heterophyllus Lam.); and Noklang (jaggary), menink (Soot), hokwai (charcoal) and urea. Plant adulterants are pounded during preparation of thap, while jaggary, soot, charcoal and urea are added to fermented rice before distillation. It is reported that jaggary has added advantage over others, in that alcohol can be distilled 4-5 times from the same fermented rice, in each time 2-3 days are kept after addition of jaggary before alcohol is distilled. Adulterant laced alcohol causes headache and longer hangover particularly jaggary; consumption of such alcohol cause illness with a typical symptoms of vomiting, swollen face, hands and feet and loss of memory.

**Uses**

During traditional marriages (Adam Asar), especially prepared horlank filled in gourd shell, Bongkrok is offered to the bride’s father as part of the ritual26. Horlank especially prepared for propitiation of Hem Angtar (Household Gods) is called Hor Kangthir (Kangthir: holy). It is reported that consumption of Hor Kangthir before offering to the God to be propitiated is a taboo; if it so happens accidentally, it is believed that the horlank has to be prepared afresh for the purpose, else the family will face the wrath of the God. During big social occasions like Chojun and Peng another form of beverage called hor apo (horpo in short) is prepared from horlank for offering to God and for general consumption as well. It is prepared by adding an appreciable quantity of water to the mixture of horlank and fermented rice and mixed thoroughly till a whitish mixture is formed. The liquid mixture is sieved with specially prepared sieve called Se to produce horpo. During a traditional harvesting festival called Hacha Kekan, only bechurang is used to accomplish the sacred act.

Highly concentrated alcohol is locally referred as Hor Acho (hor: alcohol; acho: pure/concentrated). Hor acho is sometimes used as medicine in rural areas in cases like dysentery and pharyngitis. For this purpose one or two doses @ 10-50 ml hor acho is taken to cure the ailments. During 1960s and 1970s when there was epidemic of cholera, people in rural areas used to rub hor acho on their body as a precaution. Horlank is often used as preservative for dried fish (manthu); dried fishes are first soaked in salt water and then sprinkled with horlank. They are properly mixed and stored in dried bamboo tube. Horlank is reported to add aroma and flavour and increase shelf-life of the food (i.e. dried fish).

**Conclusion**

Investigation among other hill tribes of North-East India revealed that Croton joufara-based thap is traditional to the Karbis; Amomum corynrostachyum is often used by the Karbis and Jaintias of Hamren sub-division (Karbi Anglong). Acacia pennata-based thap is used by almost all tribes particularly non-Karbis living in and around Diphu town. Use of horlank in marriage and worship is customary and mandatory among Karbi people. Present study has also established that thap as a potential yeast medium was known to the Karbis since time immemorial. Thus, commercial exploitation of these plants as yeast media may be explored.
Acknowledgement

The author is indebted to all informants for their help and local guides for their co-operation and hospitality during field work. Special thanks to Sri Mongal Sing Ronghang for his demonstration on Bhot and Sri Hemari Tokbi, District Cultural Officer, Karbi Anglong for his view pertaining to observation of social taboo by a section of the Karbis.

References