

Biological motifs and designs on traditional costumes among *Karbis* of Assam

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Traditional costumes are often adorned with designs depicting indigenous flora and fauna, objects and even some abstract figures. Field study was undertaken with the objective to elucidate the traditional knowledge on weaving and to find out the intrinsic relationships between biological objects and cultural artifacts during 2002-2008 among the *Karbis* following unstructured interview and through personal observations by the authors. Motifs and designs are weaved or embodied following certain indigenous techniques viz. *kerip*, *ketur*, *keran*, *kehom*, *keroi*, *kepharlem* and *kethak*. The findings of the study indicate that traditional motifs and designs on textiles are not for mere display but are emotionally associated with their social, cultural and religious life. Further, the similarity in material culture of the *Karbis* and *Tiwas* observed in some respects may be attributed to their co-habitation in the same Geographical area and reciprocal influence of their cultures.

Keywords: *Karbi* tribe, Backstrap looms, Biological motifs and designs, Flora and fauna, Cultural identity

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North Eastern region of India is unique for its ethnic and cultural diversities coupled with biological diversity. The region is largely inhabited by hill tribes of *Mongoloid* origin. Among the prominent tribes of the region are the *Karbis* who possess unique traditions and culture distinct from other hill tribes. Ethnically, they are *Mongoloid* and speak a dialect belonging to the *Tibeto-Burmese*, particularly *Kuki-Chin* sub-group of languages^{1,2,3}. Their original habitat is believed to be in the Kuki-Chin area, in an around the Chinwin river valley in western Myanmar, before being finally settled in present Karbi Anglong district of Assam and other parts of North Eastern Region of India³.

Preparation of different items of clothing occupies an important part of material culture of the *Karbis*. Dresses with distinctive colour, motifs and designs not only reflect the cultural identity of the *Karbis* but also indicative of possession of rich cultural heritage and traditional Knowledge. A *Karbi* man generally remains bare-bodied but usually with a red or white *poho* (turban) on his head. A loin cloth called *rikong* is worn keeping two ends measuring about 35cm freely hanging in the front and in the rear. In a formal dress, however, he wears a *sator*, a loin cloth, down to

the calf. A woman wears a thick and black specially woven cloth called *pini* reaching up to the calf. A belt called *vamkok*, a thick beautifully decorated piece of cloth about 5cm wide and about 200cm long is tied around the waist to fix the *pini*. The chest is wrapped with another piece of cloth called *pijeso*, or *jeso* in short, which serves like a present-day blouse. The upper part of the body is covered with a well decorated piece of cloth referred as *pekok* by tying the ends of the cloth so as to hang from the right shoulder of the user³.

Loom is locally referred as *Therang*, while the warp and weft are respectively known as *arank* and *atuk*. The shed for weaving is called '*asei*'. *Kachevur atherang* refers to back strap loom while the improved fly shuttle loom is called *tanhai* or *kor atherang* (*Kor*: Machine). Clothes of all types are weaved on local back strap looms (Fig. 1) while yarns are spun from cotton (*Gossypium herbaceum* L., Malvaceae) or *Erisilk*. Yarns are often dyed with colours of blue, red or yellow (exclusively) extracted from plant and animal sources and sometimes from minerals^{4,5}.

Today, women have started working with improvised looms such as the flying shuttle loom. However, traditional dresses such as *pini*, *vamkok*,

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jarong, *choi hongthor*, etc. are weaved on loin looms even today. The present paper deals with traditional Knowledge of weaving motifs and designs on garments and its relationship with socio-religio-cultural life of the *Karbis* and dynamism of traditional knowledge.

Methodology

The present paper is the result of field work undertaken during 2002-2008 at Domoka, Diphu, Samelangso, Hamren, Monjili, Krokengdang, Ulukunchi and Amdoba in Karbi Anglong district. Prior Informed Consent from *Rong Sarthe* (village headman) and informants was obtained for undertaking field study. Elders, particularly women were consulted in collecting information on the concepts of indigenous motifs, making of loin looms and the different types of clothes weaved on it. They were also requested to narrate indigenous motifs and designs and techniques of the same. Different types of clothes and their uses were also collected during field study. Extensive visits to rural areas were undertaken because most textiles with indigenous designs and motifs are available among rural folk. Motifs on textiles among other tribes such as the *Pnars* (*Jiantias*) and *Tiwas* were also studied and compared with those of the *Karbis*.

Results

Spinning and weaving, among the *Karbis* is an exclusive occupation of women who have been weaving dresses for men and for themselves. Traditional clothing items of the *Karbis* are often adorned with beautiful designs of indigenous flora and fauna, objects and even some abstract figures. Further, expertise on weaving is considered as a qualification to become a bride and also status in the society. Clothing needs of all types are weaved on back strap loin looms and the various garments include *pini*, *pekok*, *vamkok*, *jambili*, *jamborong*, *poho*, *seleng*, *maflar*, *choi hongthor*, *jir-ik* (*bapi*), *pi seleng*, *kapor*, *pilu*, *jeso*, *pisarpi*, etc. Traditional costumes are often adorned with beautiful designs depicting indigenous flora and fauna, objects such as *sarku* (umbrella), *hijap* (hand fan) and aeroplane and even some abstract figures. The designs are of geometric pattern as found in other hill tribes of North Eastern Region of India. Each garment has specific function in the society and therefore, represents their cultural identity. Significantly, *Jambili Athon*, the traditional wood craft of the *Karbis*

was not used as motif in traditional garments, which suggests that the expertise of weaving was acquired long before the introduction of *Jambili Athon*⁶.

Studies among the *Karbis* revealed that the art of weaving motifs and designs involve various techniques producing equally varied designs and motifs as enumerated below:

1. Ketur (*ketur*: to make a shed): This is the most commonly practiced technique of weaving designs among the *Karbis* and other tribes. The technique includes selecting desired number of yarns of *arank* (warp) at appropriate location and scooping the yarns with *harpi* (Fig. 2); *asei* (shed) so created is maintained by inserting a bamboo stick called *barlim*. Many such series will be selected till a complete outline of the desired design is completed. The garment is weaved with weft and beaten either with *harpi* or *ingthi* (reed). At points marked for design, yarn of desired colour is inserted through the previously created *asei* and the *barlim* removed. It is then weaved with a few *atuk* (weft) to maintain firmness. It is continued till the design is completely weaved. Designs weaved through *ketur* is called *amang*. Many motifs and designs are weaved through *ketur* but traditional ones include *bidumkek* (circinately coiled leaf of *Diplazium esculentum* (Retz.) Sw.; Athyriaceae; Fig. 3a), *plumplam abo* (ovary of *Dillenia indica* L.; Dilleniaceae), *Ingsu mahar angphar* (flower of *Rubus lucens* Focke; Rosaceae), *mirjove angphar* (flower of *Acacia nilotica* (L.) Del. ssp. *indica* (Benth.) Bren.; Mimosaceae), *thoithe suri angphar* (flower of *Cucumis sativus* L.; Cucurbitaceae), *suve arvo* (compound leaves of *Acacia oxyphylla* Graham ex Benth.; Mimosaceae), *hambi ahom* (pod of *Entada pursaetha* DC.; Mimosaceae), *long aling* (base of *Karbi* traditional wooden mortar), *keching arveng* (wings of Gandhi bug; Fig. 3b), *che-he amek* (eyes of crab), *vorale* (Spangled drongo), *thero* (monkey), *chetung* (turtle), *ingthi* (reed), *sarku* (umbrella; Fig. 3c), *lobong arongk* (banana plant), *ingnar* (elephant; Fig. 3c), *monit* (human; Fig. 3c), *hijap* (hand fan; Fig. 3c), *voram* (peacock; Fig. 3d), *phongrong angsu* (spinous fruits of *Castanopsis indica* (Roxb.) DC.; Fagaceae; Fig. 4), *rot ahem* (aeroplane) and many more.

Amang can be weaved only in modern looms; the latter is always stretched and thus, can subtend the inserted *barlims*. However, in back strap looms the warp is alternately stretched and loosened and thus cannot subtend *barlims*, if inserted.

2. Kerip (*Kerip*: to tie): This is most prized technique of weaving designs and motifs among the *Karbis*. Yarns of desired numbers and frequencies are picked manually from *arank* (warp) to create an *asei* (shed). Extra yarns of desired colour are inserted through the *asei* and then weaved with *atuk* (weft) by beating with flat piece of wood called *harpi*. The process is continued till a desired design comes out. Weaving with *atuk* after every insertion of yarn, gives firmness and continuity of the designed portion with the undersigned part of the garment. Designs and motifs weaved through *kerip* is called *vosomek* (Fig. 5). It is believed to be the first design introduced among *Karbis* and their weaving is mandatory on some traditional dresses such as *choi hongthor* (Fig. 6). *Vosomek* comes in varied traditional motifs such as *che-he amek* (eyes of crab), *vosaru amek*, *turchim amekso*, *long aling* (base of traditional wooden mortar), *tanhai amang*, *thar-et kona*, *keching arveng* (wings of Gandhi bug), etc.

Weaving of *vosomek* is very complex and time consuming for which modern weavers have switched to easier techniques. For the same reason today the art is known only to a few elder women. It is the most revered technique of weaving motifs of the *Karbis*.

3. Kehom (*kehom*: to hang something): This is another difficult art of weaving designs on garments. In this case additional designs are made and stitched along the margins of garment or embroidery is made along the margins. Motifs produced through this technique are called *amarbong* or *marbong* in short. *Ok arbung* (backbone of fish) is a popular *marbong* weaved on garments.

4. Keran (*keran*: to make warp): As the name suggests, designs are marked while making the warp for the loom. In other words, yarns of desired colour are made as part of *arank* and the *asei* is also adjusted. In this type weaving is easy and fast as no *barlims* are required and all necessary arrangements are predetermined. Designs produced through the technique of *keran* are called *ahi* (stripe) and the latter are always along the warp. *Ahi* is selectively weaved on clothes such as *pilu*, *pikapor*, *pekok*, *jir-ik* and other garments.

5. Keroi (*keroi*: to stitch): Though *keroi* literally means to stitch, traditionally this technique involves joining two pieces of garments by stitching and producing motifs in the process. Garments that

requires stitching includes *pini* (womens' lower garment), *pilu*, etc. Designs and motifs weaved through the above 4 techniques can be produced by *keroi*.

6. Keparlem (*keparlem*: to make rope): This technique involves weaving rope from the ends of unweaved warp of garments and thereby making knots that adds beauty to the product.

7. Kethak (*kethak*: to weave): This technique of weaving leads to the formation of *apai* (horizontal stripe) on garments. Yarns of desired colour of weft are simply weaved without interruptions till *apai* of desired width is produced. *Apai* is always perpendicular to the warp. Though garments of any type can be weaved by this technique, *pi sarpi* is worth mentioning as this traditional red and black striped garment is used by elderly women only (Fig. 7).

Discussion

Traditional motifs and designs on textiles among the *Karbis* are not for mere display but are emotionally associated with their social, cultural and religious life. *Vorale* is a traditional bird, *plumplam abo* is used as hair wash, *phongrong* is used in ritual, seeds of *hambi* is used in traditional sport, consumption of *che-he* is a *taboo* for priests, *thero* is a source of nuisance in *jhum*, *lobong* has multiple use (food, medicine, raft, rituals), *long* (wooden mortar for threshing paddy and for grinding other items), *keching* (important crop pest), *thoithe* (edible fruit and a regular *jhum* crop), *dumkek* (an important vegetable) and many other designs and motifs are also associated with the socio-religio-cultural life of *Karbis*.

Pnars (*Jaintias*) of Karbi Anglong wear simple dresses and lack motifs that adorn dresses of the *Karbis* and *Tiwas*. *Bidumkek* motif is also common among *Tiwa* garments (Fig. 8). Similarity in material culture of the *Karbis* and *Tiwas* observed in some respects may be attributed to their co-habitation in the same Geographical area and reciprocal influence of their cultures. This reflects the dynamic nature of Traditional Knowledge. It is reported that the *Karbis* have acquired the expertise of weaving from the *Tiwas* but the former make more diverse motifs than the latter tribe. It can be explained that the art of weaving was introduced to the *Karbis* by the *Tiwas* but in the course of time the *Karbis* have developed additional knowledge resulting in weaving more diversified motifs traditional to the tribe. This explanation seems probable because the *Karbis*, who



Fig. 1-8—1, Karbi woman weaving *Pini* on back strap loom; 2, Karbi girl weaving motif using *harpi*; 3, Traditional motifs on garment. a) *Bidumkek*; b) *Keching arveng*; c) man on elephant holding umbrella (R) and hand fan (L); d) peacock; 4, *Phongrong angsu* (circles), spinous fruits of *Castanopsis indica* in *vamkok*; 5 *Vosomek* motifs on *Choi hongthor*; 6, Karbi bachelor attired in *choi hongthor* during traditional *banjar* dance; 7, Karbi woman putting on *Pi sarpi*, red-black striped cloth and 8 *Bidumkek* motif in Tiwa garment

till recently lived a semi-nomadic life before settling in the present habitat (Karbi Anglong district and adjoining areas), would have been impossible to generate time to learn knowledge of high skill weaving who at that time, as per historical records^{1,2,3,7} frequently moved from one place to another for safety and fertile land for *jhum*. If it is so, the material culture of the *Karbhis* before and during the period of migration needs a thorough investigation.

Conclusion

Traditional costumes adorned with motifs and designs are indispensable part of social, cultural and religious life of the *Karbhis*. Dresses, as well as colour and motifs and designs on textiles not only reflect cultural identity but also indicate possession of rich traditional knowledge and also source of their history. However, knowledge of embodying traditionally used motifs and designs are fast declining among the *Karbhis* due to acculturation and access to machines made textile products. Further, weaving clothes in back strap looms is confined to a few elderly women only. In the past, expertise developed in weaving among girls was considered as a qualification to become a bride and also status in the society. Value addition to local textile products has the potential to uplift rural economy. A jacket with motif of *Jambili Athon*, traditional wood craft of the *Karbhis* and muffler

are popular items and these are revered choice as gifts in social and cultural occasions.

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