

Traditional textiles and costumes of *Karbi* and *Biate* tribes of Meghalaya

Anjali Karolia* & Baiahunlang Ladia

Department of Clothing and Textiles, Faculty of Family and Community Sciences, The MS University of Baroda,
Vadodara 390 002, Gujarat
E-mail: anjalikarolia@hotmail.com

Received 20.05.2009; revised 07.09.2009

The present study was an attempt to study the tribal textiles and costumes of Meghalaya which was almost non-existent and has reached the verge of extinction in the name of change. The objectives of the study were to document the yarns, looms, colors, motifs and costumes worn for different occasions. Data was gathered through personal interviews coupled with observation method from purposive selected samples and photographs were taken to support the study. Weaving of these two tribes was the monopoly of women. They wove their dress by themselves on the loom which they set up in their dwelling house. The study revealed that there have been certain changes in the traditional textiles and costumes in terms of yarns, colours and motifs used.

Keywords: Back strap loom, *Biate* tribe, Cotton, Eri silk, Fly shuttle loom, *Karbi* tribe

IPC Int. Cl.⁸: D02G 3/00, D01H, D06H, A41D, A47F 7/19, A47F 8/00, G03C 7/04, G03F 3/00, A63H 1/22, D01B 7/00, D01G/17/00

The treasure of tribal arts and crafts of North East India, a land of myriad culture and people, is immense and has an astounding range, diversity and beauty. North East India has the unique distinction of having more than 100 tribal communities that dominate the total population and it is a handicrafts power house wherein each region is replete with different craft traditions. Meghalaya- recline in the picturesque vista of the abode of clouds, is one of the seven sisters states of the North Eastern Region adorned with lush of exquisite range of traditional textiles, magnificent tribal life and with numerous fairs and festivals. It is like a variegated patchwork quilt consisting of 7 districts that include the East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, East Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, Jaintia Hills and Ri-Bhoi district and a multiplicity of tribes and tribal groups¹. The traditional textiles and costume of each tribe of the region, strengthens communal solidarity and beliefs. The tribal costume has its own charm with its traditional textiles which shine in their highest glory of beauty. Gradually due to competition and rapid development, metamorphosis of the tribal social set-up, handicrafts of the tribes has lost much of its

market, and is almost non-existent and reached the verge of extinction in the name of change². Preoccupied with the survival of the crafts and craftsmen, the endeavor of the study was to touch upon the futuristic vision of the traditional textiles, their status and strength of survival. In this view, the specific objectives were to study the distinctive features of the traditional textiles in terms of yarns used, looms, colors, motifs and their symbolism and to document the traditional costume of men and women worn for different occasions.

Methodology

To achieve authentic data for the study, a systematic descriptive research design was planned. Personal interviews cum observation method were used to suffice the purpose. Two questionnaires were framed for the interview schedule regarding the traditional textiles and the traditional costumes. Sampling selection was done by adopting purposive sampling method. Initially from the census office of Meghalaya a list of villages was procured from all the seven districts of the state. Out of the seven districts, two districts were selected purposively and four villages were selected with two villages from each district. The selection of the villages was on the basis

*Corresponding author

of certain factors like concentration of the tribe's population, the villages practicing weaving to a greater extent, accessible by the investigator in terms of mobility and safety. The villages selected were Marmain and Umden villages from the Ri-Bhoi district for gathering data for the *Karbi* tribe and Jowai and Saipung village from the Jaintia Hills district for *Biate* tribe. A total of six weavers and six families were selected with three weavers and three families from each tribe. The sample selection was done on the basis that each weavers should have two or more looms, families having minimum one member of 1st generation (60 yrs and above), 2nd generation (29-59 yrs) and 3rd generation (18-28 yrs) and willingness to respond.

After finalization of the sample selection and the interview schedule, the information was procured through an extensive field work. All the interviews to the weavers and the families were conducted in colloquial language and responses were recorded in English. Both primary source and secondary source with photographic documentation facilitated documentation of the study. The data was systematically analyzed to get detailed information regarding the weavers, families, traditional textiles and traditional costumes worn for different occasions supported by photographic evidence also.

Results and discussion

The present study aimed to document the traditional textiles and costumes of the two selected tribes of Meghalaya namely the *Karbi* and the *Biate* tribe.

Traditional textiles and costumes of the *Karbi* tribe

The weavers from this tribe belonged to joint families and were rather backward in education. The weavers mentioned that weaving as well as spinning was one of their major cottage industries from which they earned between Rs 300-2000 per month, however, agriculture remained their main source of income.

Looms and raw materials

Every *Karbi* women has their own traditional fly shuttle wooden looms known as *pe-therang* installed in the enclosed *verandah* outside the house and they practiced the rearing of silk worm from the cocoons and had the art of spinning cotton too. The *Karbi* weavers used natural cotton yarns, eri silk yarns that they procured from headquarter Nongpoh, in the

district itself and bazaar yarns like the viscose rayon and acrylic of different plies obtained from the local market at Sonapur in Assam.

Colours

Traditionally the *Karbis* used three colors, i.e. white, indigo black (dark bluish black), and red. It was noted from the survey that these traditional colors were the natural colors prepared from natural wild herbs. The *Karbis* most popular dye was indigo obtained from the leave called *Sibu* (indigo plant leaves), with the availability of threads in the market, but these days the *Karbi* weavers used bazaar yarns of different colors to add variety to their textiles and they mostly used tints and shades of green and blue.

Motifs and its symbolism

The *Karbis* have their own traditional motifs which bear socio-psychological significance related to their tribe. Generally, the tribe focuses on motifs inspired by phenomena of nature like flowers, leaves, trees, creepers and animals. As per the source, they also wove geometrical motifs being influenced from the motifs of Assam. The *Jambili Athan* (Fig. 1) was a cultural motif associated with the cultural background of the tribe. It represents the symbolical rod with 5 branches which signifies the 5 clans of the tribe. The rod was used during a socio-religious ceremony known as *Chomangkan*. The animal motifs used in a *Karbi* traditional textile were cock motif known as *vo-alo* (Fig. 1) signifying a domestic animal which awakens the people from their sleep at dawn. Goat motif known as *betoh* (Fig.1) was another animal used as a sacrifice to a *Karbi* God named *Peng* signifying purity. Elephant motif called *engnar* symbolizes strength and butterfly motif known as *pipli* (Fig. 1) symbolizing freedom, joy and merriment.

The flower motif known as *mir* (Fig. 1) which was mainly used in women's attire often woven with a combination of a leaf. The petals symbolized the oneness of the 5 *Karbi* clans united in love and happiness and the leaf symbolized spring. A Diamond motif (Fig. 1) was the only geometrical motif used by the *Karbis*. It symbolized auspicious things and good fortune as it was a precious stone. This motif was being influenced from the Assamese motifs.

Traditional textiles

The *Rekong* (Fig. 2) was one of the men's loin cloth made of cotton or sometimes if wealthy of

eri-silk. It is a cloth of 15cm wide and 1.8 m long worn to cover the private parts. The cloth which was meant for occasions has a 15cm red border woven in traditional motifs which runs crosswise along the edge of the fabric known as *Rekong Vevot* (Fig. 2).

The *Karbi* men wore a *Choi-Hongthor* (Fig. 2) which was a traditional sleeveless jacket with full front opening. It was made of cotton found in colors of black and blue with long fringes at the end covering round the front and back. The *Jambili Athan* motif was a must then only the item projects a status symbol of social value.

Bor Kapor (Fig. 2) was a thick wrapper wrapped as a shawl by the males during winter season. The cloth was made of eri-silk in plain weave. The cloth symbolizes warmth.

The turban worn on the head by *Karbi* men called *Poho* (Fig. 2) was of 1.8 m long and 30 cm wide. It has tassels extended at the edge of the cloth for aesthetic beauty. Traditionally, it was made of eri silk but later cotton was also used and the colors were found in black, white, red and yellow.

The *Peselang* (Fig. 3) shawl was one of the inseparable cloths used as the belonging of the bride. The shawl itself was of white color woven with hand spun cotton yarns and a red border running crosswise.

The *Pini langtdong*, (Fig. 3) was a women's daily waist wrapper which resembles a long straight skirt but has a longer length that it could be wrapped at the waist 2 to 3 rounds and falls up to ankle. The mostly used colors were black, dark blue and dark green.

Pini (Fig.3) was a women's cloth wrapped around the waist up to ankle which was made of cotton woven in plain weave in a plain background. It had narrow borders at both ends of the cloth and a wider border at the center. It measures 1-2 m in length and 1 m wide. A piece of artistic cloth used by the *Karbi* women to cover the upper part of their body called *Pekok* (Fig. 3) which measures 11/2 m in length and 2 m wide. It has stripes woven in black, red and white

Pesarpi (Fig. 3) is a cloth worn as a *Pekok* by the older women of the tribe woven in plain weave having a white cotton background with stripes of black and red at regular intervals. The cloth was worn during religious ceremonies.

Traditional costumes

For daily activities a *Karbi* man wore simple clothing which consisted of a cotton white shirt *choi*, a lower garment known as *rekong*, a turban called

poho and wrapped a shawl called *bor-kapor* during winter season. *Karbi* women wore a short sleeve cotton blouse known as *Choi* then they wrapped one piece of cotton cloth across called *Pekok* and wore a lower garment known as *Pini* from the waist to ankle (Fig. 4).

For the marriage costume, the groom wore a traditional *poho* which was draped both over his head and around his neck; he wore a sleeveless jacket with fringed at the bottom called *choi-hongthor* and a lower garment known as *rekong-vevot*. The bride wore a red blouse called *choi*, a one piece cloth worn across the shoulders known as *pekok* and she wore a lower garment called *pini* with few silver ornaments (Fig. 5). It was mandatory for married women in the *Karbi* society to wear a one piece of unstitched cloth called *peselang* (Fig. 3). Unlike the *Karbi* men, the women had some ornaments to beautify themselves. The most beautiful ornament put on by aged and married *Karbi* woman was *nothengpi*, (Fig. 6) which a pair of very big ear-ring made of silver. It is about 5cm in length having a diameter of about 1cm. This ear-ring is detachable into 2 parts and it can be fixed in the ear through a screw attached on the ring itself. The *Karbi* lady use silver bracelets called *roit aroir* (Fig. 6) which was worn during her engagement ceremony. A characteristic ornament worn by a *Karbi* lady for marriage and for other festivals wore necklaces made up of red beads and silver coins. The coins used were 1 rupee coins known as *lek hiki*, 50 paisa coins called *lek arduki* and 25 paisa coins named *lek sika* (Fig. 6). For the display of wealth different coins were used, depending on the capacity and the economic status of the women, coins were selected accordingly. For festivals both *Karbi* men and women wore similar dress to that of the marriage costume. However, a *Karbi* women in addition, wore a belt around her waist known as *vankok* (Fig. 6) and a silver chain known as *lek jingjari* (Fig. 6) The men wore a silver necklace known as *lekruve-lekenji* (Fig. 6) made of silver chains with bunch of silver coins protruding out the chain at regular intervals.

Traditional textiles and costumes of the *Biate* tribe

The respondents of this tribe had nuclear families and most of them were graduates. All 3 weavers practically wove their own clothes for their personal use as well as they took orders and sold their product and earned between Rs 800-1800 a month.

Looms and raw materials

It was found that the looms used by the *Biate* weavers were the back strap looms with an average width of 112.5 cm to 120 cm and varying lengths. The *Biates* used cotton known as *Pat* grown in their lands and have a tradition of rearing eri silk worm. In recent years, mill made yarns was readily available in the market at cheaper price, therefore, the weavers weave their cloths by using fine yarns imported from the state of Assam and from the local market of the towns nearby their village. Hence, they used acrylic of 1, 2, 4 ply, and at times viscous rayon and *zari* yarns.

Colours

For dyeing cloth, the *Biates* were aware of blue-indigo and red. They obtained their blue dye from the indigo plant which they cultivated, while their red cotton was obtained by boiling the white cotton with various roots dug in the jungle. Traditionally, the *Biates* were mostly seen in white and black with a touch of red. Later with the advent of mill made yarns, the weavers started using bright colors like yellow, purple, blue, green, pink and maroon to add variety to their textiles.

Motifs and its symbolism

The motifs of the *Biate* were being inspired by phenomena of nature like bunch of flowers, the markings on a snake, the black and white of human eye and the design on a butterfly's wings.

A motif inspired from the markings of the snake (Fig. 7) was seen in borders of the *Biates* women's textiles. The design interpreted that the *Biates* were originally referred as the snake worshippers. The motif was an emblem of the *Biates* believing that the snake was a store of wealth. Flower motif known as *par* (Fig. 7) of the tribe symbolizes festivity and merriment. Diamond motifs known as *lungilu* (Fig. 7) were the most common and widely used motifs found in the textiles woven by the *Biates*. It served as a symbol of power, strength, brilliance and unparalleled beauty because of its remarkable hardness, clarity and was considered as a precious stone. Continuous diamond motifs patterned in black and white that runs horizontally on the textile creating a border denotes the human eye (Fig. 7). Some of the motifs seen on traditional textiles of the *Biates* consist of a series of parallel lines only which was interpreted as row of bamboos called *rua* (Fig. 7). The men folk of the *Biate* tribe were very fond of basket work and most of

their baskets were made of bamboos. Thus, the parallel lines signify the bamboo craft.

Traditional textiles

One of the common features of the *Biate* traditional textile was that 2 pieces were woven separately and then stitched together.

Puanpui (Fig. 8) the mattress, woven thickly with the cotton in artistic touch was the most valued of all the women's work. It was a very serviceable form of quilt made by passing round every fourth or fifth thread of the warp a small roll of raw cotton and drawing both ends up. It measures 5 m in length with 2 m wide. It was the most important customary wedding gift item in the *Biate* society.

The shawl woven in plain weave from an eri silk yarn known as *Rilungpuan Zia* (Fig. 8) literally meaning the worm cloth, had a border with diamond motifs running horizontally at both ends of the cloth. It was highly regarded and traditionally considered as the grandmother's precious gift item to her grandchildren.

Thangzuapuan (Fig. 8) was a men's shawl woven in plain weave of approximately 3 m long and 1m wide with colorful floral broad borders on both the edges signifying colors. The shawl was reserved only to the warriors, conquerors and successful men who have taken heads in their lives.

Another men's shawl known as *Vaiphangzia* (Fig. 8) traditionally made of wool of black color in plain weave measuring 3 m in length and 1 m in breadth. The shawl has a plain background with a series of longitudinal parallel lines known as '*rua*' motif (Fig. 7), within a border of four inches wide that runs horizontally on the cloth.

Rizempuan (Fig. 8) shawl of 2 m length and 1 m wide was wrapped by both men and women during winter season. The cloth was divided into 3 bands, the center band being of black, bearing three spear motifs and the other 2 identical bands lying on either side of the center band had no figures woven on it.

Puanhak (Fig. 8) was an eri silk shawl of 4 m long and 1 1/2 m in breadth. It was woven in plain background and was meant at the time of condolence.

The summer cloth *Kaiperang* (Fig. 9) worn by old men of the *Biate* society was made of pure cotton in plain weave measuring 15cm wide and ninety inches long. The *Kaiperang* was found to be very scanty that the *Biate* men had adopted a cloth called *Diarkai* (Fig. 8) that covered from the waist to the thighs and

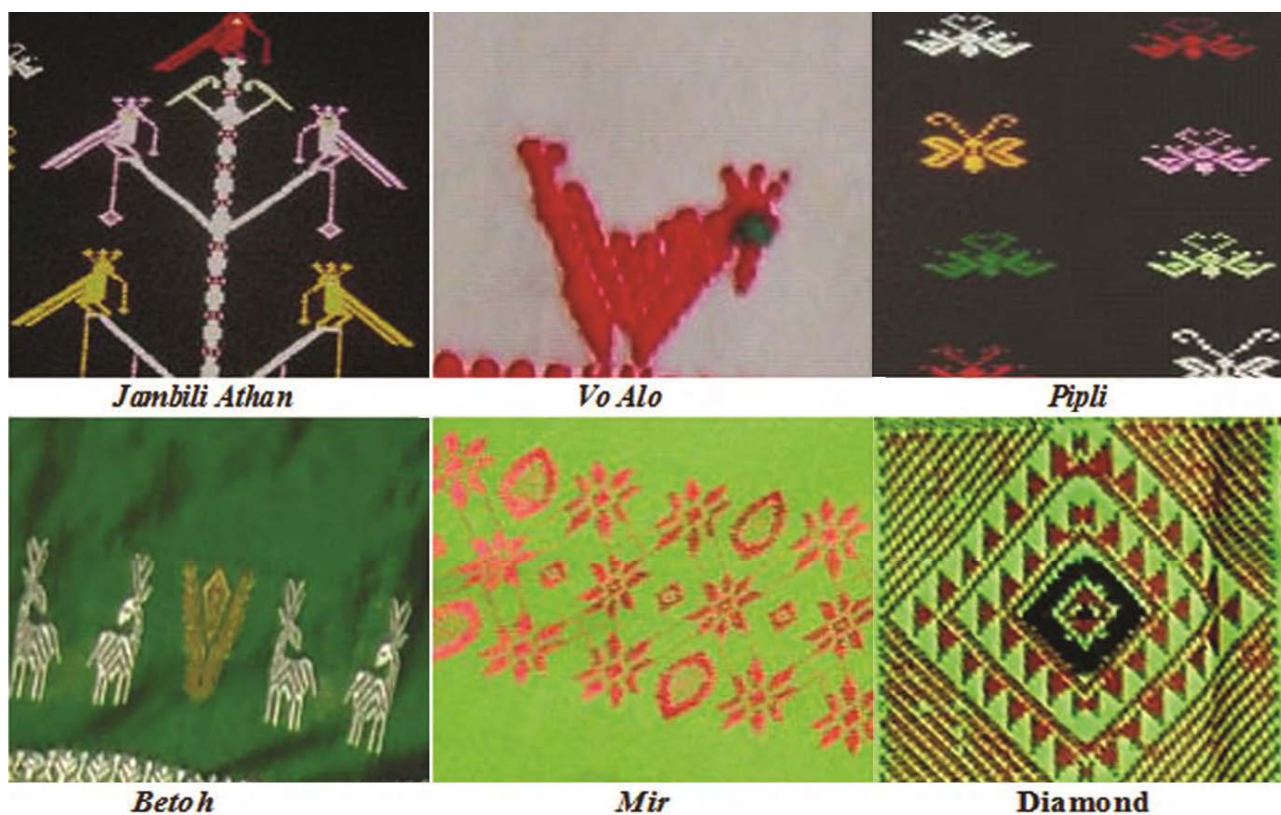


Fig.1 Motif of the *Karbi* tribes



Fig. 2 Traditional textiles of *Karbi* men



Fig. 3 Traditional textiles of Karbi women

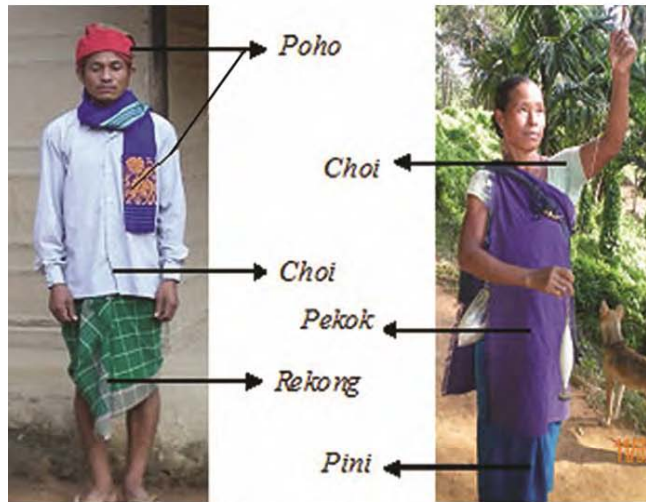


Fig. 4 Traditional costume for daily wear

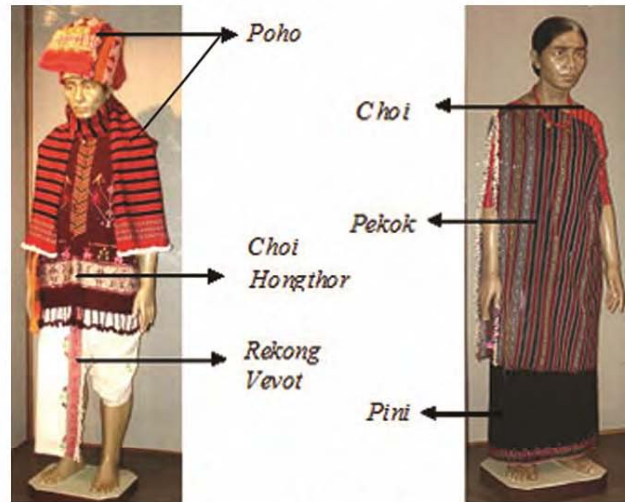


Fig. 5 Traditional costume for occasions



Fig. 6 Ornaments worn by the Biate tribes



Fig. 7 Motifs of the Biate tribes



Fig. 8 Traditional textiles of the *Biata* tribes



Fig. 9 Traditional textiles of the *Biata* men and women

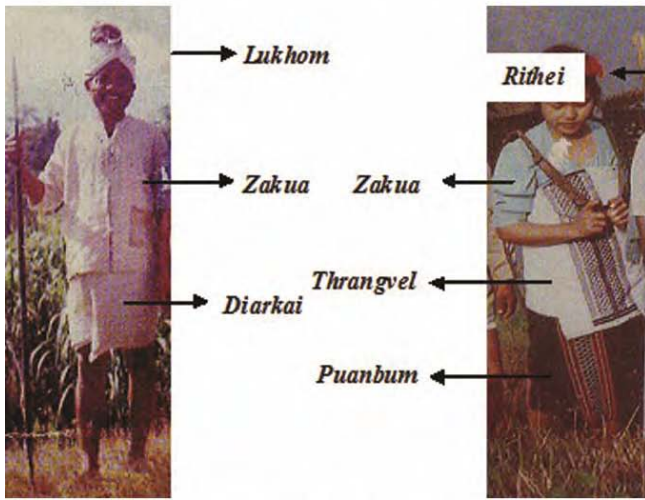


Fig. 10 Traditional costume of the *Biata* tribes for daily wear



Fig. 11 Traditional costume of the *Biata* tribes for occasions

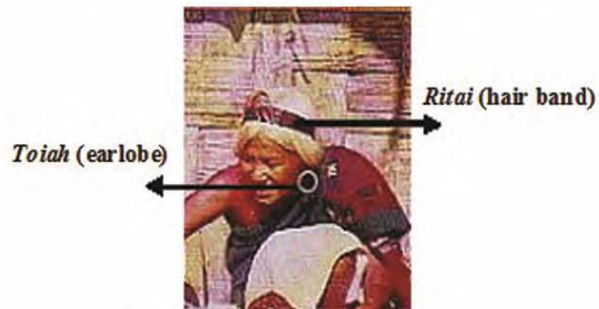


Fig. 12 Accessories worn by *Biata* tribe women

resembled a *dhoti*. The cloth was of plain weave with long tassels at both edges.

The *Biate* men wore a cloth around his head which measures 175 cm long and 62.5 cm wide. The cloth known as *Lukhom* (Fig. 9) was woven with either black or white cotton in plain background and borders of 25-30 cm wide running across the length of the cloth at both edges.

Puan Bum (Fig. 9) was a cloth of the women of the *Biate* tribe that falls from the waist to ankle. It was of cotton woven in plain weave in white measuring 100 cm to 105 cm in breadth and 36 inches in length. The pattern consists of a centre black border and two side borders towards the end of the cloth. Along with the *Puan Bum*, the women wore a breast cover known as *Thrangvel* (Fig. 9) which was found in black with white borders. In absence of the *Puan Bum* and a *Thrangve*, the women wore a cloth that covers across the shoulders and falling to the thighs known as *Choipuan* (Fig. 9) measuring 11/2 m long and 2 m meters wide.

Traditional costumes

The common apparel of the *Biate* men was a plain white cotton *diarkai* or *dhoti*, a simple white shirt called *zakua* and a *lukhom* or headgear. During summers, the old men wear a loin cloth to cover their private parts called *kaipereng*. The women's dress consisted of a *mekhla* called *puanbum*, *choipuan* hanging from under the arms, *thrangvel* which was a breast cover worn together with *puanbum* (Fig. 10). The ornaments worn daily was a silver ear lobe known as *toiah* and *ritai* which was a hair band made of bamboo (Fig. 11).

For different occasions like marriage, socio-religious festivals and dance festivals, *Biate* men wore a sleeveless jacket called *Zakua*, a lower garment that wrapped round the waist up to the knees known as *diarkai* and he draped a head cover known as *lukhom*. The women wore a blouse called *zakua*, and a *mekhla* known as *puanbum*. She also wore a flower head band made of bamboo called *ritai*. *Biate* men do not wear any kind of ornaments but during festivals, a *Biate* male dancer, along with his traditional dress, carries a two edged sword known as *Chen* (Fig. 12).

Conclusion

The study regarding the *Karbi* and *Biate* tribe revealed that weaving was the monopoly of the womenfolk. All the women started weaving at their

very young age and by the time they attain puberty, they are masters in weaving. The weavers wove textiles for family members as well as they took orders for the local market. Both the tribes still practised rearing of silk and spinning of cotton. However, they used mill made yarns procured from the local market. From the survey conducted it was observed by the researcher that the traditional dress of the 2 tribes have undergone a rapid change in terms of designs, motifs and yarns. The younger generation had started wearing western and other Indian garments and the yarns used traditionally if cotton and wool had changed to acrylic and viscose. Most of the respondents were unknown about their traditional textiles, costumes, their significance and importance. This justifies the purpose of documenting the traditional textiles and costumes of *Karbi* and *Biate* tribes of Meghalaya before they get rejected from the social and cultural society. The Indian Ministry of Textile has also taken an initiative to study some of the products of the region conducted by the Development Commissioner (Handicraft) for receiving the Geographical Indication (GI) logo as the logo conveys an assurance of quality and distinctiveness to the product essentially attributable to its origin helping the artisans to approach the foreign market³. In this view, the present study conducted was an earnest attempt towards the preservation of the traditional textiles and costumes before they completely lose their distinctiveness and also with the initiative made by the Government, there is a chance to improve the socio-economic status of the weavers.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to the knowledge providers - Mrs Ingty and Mrs Klien from Marmain village and Ms. Terongpi from Umden village for sharing the information on textiles of the *Karbi* tribe and Mrs Nganpui and Mrs Ngamli from Saipung village and Mrs Thieite from Jowai town for the textiles of *Biate* tribe.

References

- 1 Sengupta S, *Tribal studies in North East India*, (Mittal Publications, New Delhi), 2002, 25-27.
- 2 Gosh G & Ghosh.S, *Textiles of North Eastern India*, (KLM Pvt .Ltd, Calcutta), 2000, 98-101.
- 3 Images, *Business of fashion*, 10(3) (2009).
- 4 Lalsim.R, *Tribes of N.C.Hills, Assam, North Cachar Hills* (Autonomous Council Publication, Assam), 2005, 63-105, 155-182.