

Traditional Fashion Festooned With Motifs and Design In Karbi Culture Of Assam, India- A State- Off- Art Report

Kuntala N.Barua^{1*}, Bithi Batua² and Hoimonti Saikia³

^{1 & 2} Forest Ecology & Climate Change Division Rain Forest Research Institute, Sotai, Jorhat-785010

³ Tata Institute of Social Sciences Guwahati, Assam

Abstract: In the present study Traditional Textile and costumes related to motifs and design of Karbi tribe of Assam were primarily focused. Field survey was carried out in six blocks of East Karbi Anglong district and one block of West Karbi Anglong district during 2018-19 to illuminate the traditional knowledge through structured questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions. The most significant aspects included here was various components of traditional back strap loom, unique costumes of men and women, other clothing pattern, traditional ornaments, motifs & believes and herbal dye. At present context the usage and production of these traditional artifacts are under precarious condition due to modern production techniques apt for the changing of times.

Key words: Traditional Textile, costumes, motifs & design, indigenous dyes, Karbi Tribe of Assam

Date of Submission: 04-05-2020

Date of Acceptance: 18-05-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Every tribal community practices their own age old traditional weaving of textile. Folk costume was the identity markers of a community that represent their culture and brings up an image of the tribe². Weaving was a skill and livelihood occupation inherited from their forefather that was passed down generations among women. Besides agriculture, women were engaged in weaving as a source of additional occupation. They may not necessarily undergo training in weaving, the ability was taught from their elders. Each tribal household be the owner of a customary loom.

Karbhis, one of the important ethnic groups of Assam were racially Indo- Mongoloid group. Linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group^{1 4 6}. According to the census of India (2011) the total population of the entire district was 9, 56,313 accounting for 3.06% of the total population of the state with density of 92 persons per sq. km. Like any other community of North-east India Karbi tribe also have a very rich and unique culture especially in textile. Since they were people who have been deeply influenced by nature and its beauty, definitely this influence was seen being manifested in their attires and other varied textile. However, a little information about the costume of Karbi tribe was documented till date³. Lot of elements still remains unexplored and further attention seriously needed for the widespread recognition of this gorgeous and prosperous asset. Therefore, present study was an attempt to document the traditional loom and costumes of Karbi Tribe of Assam to an extent in its socio-ritualistic sense.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The *Karbi* tribe is predominantly inhabitant of Karbi Anglong district of Assam, has a latitudinal extent between 25° 33' N to 26° 35' N and longitudinal extent from 92° 10' E to 93° 50' E. The district covers a total area of 10,434 sq km with 11 CD blocks accounting for 13.3% of the area of Assam state enjoys autonomy as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India since 17 November, 1951. The district bounded by Golaghat district on the east, Meghalaya and Morigaon on the west, Nagaon and Golaghat districts on the north and N.C. Hills and Nagaland state on the south and physiographically separated into plains (15%) and hills (85%).

Methods:

Detailed field survey was carried out in six blocks of East Karbi Anglong district namely Rongmongwe, Nilip, Bokajan, Lumbajong, Lungsumepie, Howraghat and Hamreng & Rongkhang block of West Karbi Anglong during the period from April 2018 to February 2020. Information about the *Karbi* traditional loom, costumes connected to socio-ritualistic sense, traditional dye were recorded based on the Focus

Group Discussion (FGD) and Interview method by selecting particularly female person, age- group of 22–70 years, who have knowledge and experience of traditional weaving practices. With the prior consent of respondents for recording the information, they were asked about the traditional dresses with respect to their festivals, ornaments, handloom and traditional dyeing process that have been acquired through parental heritage.

Household Survey – Structured Questionnaires are developed to carry out household interviews for the head of households (six villages with 10 households from each block). Altogether 420 households were surveyed.

Focus Group Discussions – FGDs were carried out with different groups of weavers of the tribe.

In-depth Interviews with the Key respondents – The method allowed carrying out interviews in depth to collect information on different textiles of the tribe who had the knowledge of the art.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Karbhis were one of the finest weavers and had isolated traditional custom from the time of immemorial. The gorgeous hand woven garments/products reflect the skill and creativeness of the weaver. This indigenous technique signified socio cultural and religious beliefs of the tribe. Art of weaving, design and motives, costumes, traditional dye as enumerated here:

Handloom

Karbi traditional loom was a back strap simple tension movable loom known as “*Therang*”. It has been usually associated with women from olden time. A bamboo beam was tied between two posts and a wood of *Mesua ferrea* was hanged on the beam to form the bar of loom. According to the length of the requisite cloth, the weaver sits at an appropriate distance and applied their body weight to tension the loom. Various components required for *Therang* weaving were given in Figure-1.

Chek - It was made out of *Bambusa tulda* used for strapping the cloth or yarn which holds it tight.

Owek - Owek had two parts, one used to keep the count of no of threads and the other used as a projectile for weaving. It is made from *bambusa pallida* or *Bambusa tulda*.

Berlim - *Berlim* used to fabricate flowers and other designs in the cloth that made up of *bambusa pallida* or *Bambusa tulda*.

Theilang-pong - This was a cylinder made up of *Dendrocalamus hamiltonii* which facilitates the shift of thread in the lower part of the loom to the upper part and creates a gap for the *oweke* to pass through, which in order leads to addition of new threads and hence weaving.

Hi-e-pong-lang – It was comparable to *Theilang-pong*, but was attached to various small pieces of threads which in turn check the thread in the loom from interweaving.

Harpi – Harpi was used for tightening or attaching the new threads inserted during weaving process made up of *Mesua ferrea*.

Adang - *Bambusa tulda* was used to make the adang having two cones attached on either end that facilitates to weave cloth remain unwrapped.

Thening - *Thening* was the wood of *Mesua ferrea* where the section of the cloth which was already weaved was wrapped.

Thehu - It was used to tie the loom to the waist and made of cane rope (*Calamus* sp.). Now, the weaver prefers jute ropes other than cane.

Another variety of Karbi loom was the improved fly shuttle loom meant for mass production of garment, known as “*Kor- atherang*”⁹.

Costumes

Karbi costume had their own unique style and was a sign of their folk culture and the social order. They believe it to have inherited as a legacy from the great lady *ser-dihun* who initially started the use of clothes among Karbis. The belongingness of the weaver towards their traditional costumes was the major consequence of the folk attire.

Karbi women used *Pekok* to cover the upper part of their body. The nomenclature of *Pekok*'s may vary considering the flowers, designs and colours inscribed on them. *Pekoks* were generally made of eri and cotton thread (Fig-2& Fig-3).

i. *Peh-loru pekok* - This form of *pekok* was characterized by long straight lines, generally used in violet and white colours, however, other colours can also be used.

ii. *Peh-jangphong pekok* - This *pekok* was also characterised by long straight lines, but allowed only orange and red colour shed.

iii. *Peh-sarpi pekok* - This was also characterized by long straight lines, using the colours of black and red. Small white and yellow lines were found within. It was dressed only in the time of important festivals.

iv. **Dophirso pekok** - This *pekok* was fabricated with small checks inscribed in them made out of many colours and primarily with cotton thread. It was very comfortable and they wore it in their everyday life.

v. **Peh seleng pekok** - *Seleng* were mostly the flower designed ones. The flowers were weaved only on white clothes and basically worn by the bride in marriages.

vi. **Peh seleng keding** - It was longer than normal *pekoks*, *Keding* means long. Both the ends of the cloth were flower designed and the middle part was ornamented with very small flowers. The base colour of the cloth was white.

The blouse was not familiar among women in earlier times, while *pijeso* or *jeso* was used as a breast cloth. *Jir-ik* was used only during festivals as it was beautifully decorated with *sobai* (Kori beads) and also to cover their faces during certain festivals to prevent themselves from being seen by men from other villages while dancing.

Karbi women used a piece of cloth to tie around the waist called **Pini**. *Pinis* were of two types with regard to their sizes namely *pini-kamphlak* and *Pini-langpong*. *Pini-kamphlak* was a piece of short cloth used to wear around the waist and covered the area from waist to knee. The names of *Pini-kamphlak* could vary with regard to their design which was *Rot-ahem apini*, *Asantok kejok apini*, *Barlim kethom ahi apini*, *Asuwe pini etc.* On the other hand *pini-langpong* was a piece of cloth which was long in size covered the area from the waist to the foot. Another form of *pini*, **A-phidok-pini** had white borders and worn by the brides in marriages. *Peh-seleng-pekok* and *A-phidok-pini* were must for a bride to leave the maternal house and move to a new house (Fig-4).

Rumpan/Vamkok- This was a beautifully decorated belt of around 5 cm wide and 200 cm long worn by women basically instrumental in holding the *pini* tight to the waist. Wearing of *Vamkok* was of utmost importance and the creeds in the society results in people not accepting anything cooked by a woman who haven't worn the *vamkok* during important ceremonies. The nomenclature of *vamkoks* may vary according to their designs as *Phongrong angsu Vamkok* (Fig-4).

Clothes worn by Karbi Men were also very vibrant and colorful. Various garments were specified in Fig-5.

i) **Choi Hongthor** - The shirt characterized by a V-neck and two colours either navy blue or white. Unmarried men wear the navy blue one and the married men wear the white variant.

ii) **Choi ang** - This was a jacket put on by the men on special occasions.

iii) **Poho** - This was a piece of cloth wrapped around the head and forehead and of two types-

Risomar poho - It was white in colour. The word *Risomar* means a bachelor. It was used only by bachelors.

Sarman poho - The word *sarman* stands for old or married man. This was red in colour and it was used only by them.

iv) **Chopang** - This piece of cloth decorated by *kori beads* wrap like a harness while dancing.

In old times men used to wear a very small piece cloth called *lengti* in the lower part of the body. But now they prefer wearing *peh-seleng* decorated with flowers and designs on the edges.

Other clothing

Apart from garments, Karbi women also have their expertise in making other textile accessories as in Fig-6

Chui - This was a purse used by women. In earlier times stuff like jewellerys were kept.

Piba - It was a piece of cloth tied on the back which helps in carrying babies.

Pinuku and pilu - The bed sheets used by males were called *pilu* and by females were known as *pinuku*. The *pinuku* was characterised by black lines on the middle portion and a design known as *marbong*, whereas in *pilu* there was no such specifications. The brides carried along with them the *pinuku* bed sheets to the groom's home after marriage. These cloths have such importance that they were used to accompany people as burial sheets, where the tassel side of the sheets was towards the foot. These bed sheets were also offered to the dead ones on the ceremony known *tirim-kangdug*. On the other hand the new harvest from *jhum* was brought to the granaries piled and in a *pilu*. The bed sheets with wide borders were known as *amar-kido* and if it was absent known as *pilu marlak*.

Jarong- The *jarong* was the most popular colourful and designed textile product of karbis. The old people normally used the *jarongs* with white colour and red inscribed on them, were known *sarman jarong* (*sarman* stands for old).

Ornaments (Fig-7)

Chu sek - This was a hair clip in the shape of a butterfly. It could be used by a girl only after the attainment of puberty.

Arnan-ke-et - This was a finger ring made of brass.

Rupa-roi - This was a bangle made of silver.

Nothengpi – A type of traditional earrings used by the female made of silver material similar to the Assamese traditional earring called ‘*thuria*. Earlier they used to wear all time but, this kind of traditional earring was not popularly used presently.

Ke-et-roi - This was a bangle made of brass.

Lek- *lek* stands for chains with different varieties-*lek - jinjiri- kethe, lek –torte, lek – waikong, lek-hiki or lek-dhon , lek –pengkhara, lek –pila, lek –jinjiri etc.*

Kor-dhuni – This was a silver chain worn around the waist.

Chui - ari - It was a belt/chain which tied the purse.

Motifs, its symbolism and believes

The Karbi's have their own typical art of weaving motifs, indispensable part of socio-psychological and cultural life. Natural entities such as flowers, leaves, trees, birds, animals etc. have always remained the main essence of the motifs. Butterfly motif referred to as “**Pipli**” symbolizing freedom, pleasure and merriment. The flower motif referred to as “**Mir**” which becomes especially utilized in ladies' apparel regularly woven with a combination of a leaf. Hand fan motif known as “**Hijap Amang**” which was used only **Piba** and **Pekok** never used in **Pini**⁹. “**Jambili Athan**” which was a very assertive symbol of the Karbi's speaks of their glorious cultural history. Recently the use of **Jambili Athan** symbol usage in clothes which were modernized in a sense. This modernization at certain level adulterated the original essence of this artifact which was being banned by the Karbi Sahitya Sabha for usage in Clothes⁵. Traditional motifs on textiles viz. *vorale* (traditional bird), *long* (wooden mortar), *dumkek* (an important vegetable), *thoithe* (edible fruit) and lots of other designs were connected with the socio-cultural life of the Karbis⁹.

Colours

Karbi traditional textiles still are fabricated with traditional dye extracted from plants, animals and minerals. Twenty five dye yielding plants used by the Karbi tribe along with their method of preparation was describe by Singh⁷. Seven different colors were produce from the combination of different species. Teron and Borthakur¹⁰ also describe thirteen numbers of traditional herbal dyes of Karbi tribe and their mode of preparation. During the present study twelve plant species and one insect dye were recognized. Popularization of synthetic dyes and habitat destruction of the species gradually diminishes the graceful and eco-friendly culture of the Karbi tribe.

Indigo dyes were very popular and play a significant role in socio-religious life of the people. Dye obtained from the leaves of *Marsdenia tinctoria* R.Br., a climbing plant of Apocynaceae family was the traditional sources of indigo dye (*Sibu, bujir*), but combination with *Strobilanthes cusia* (Nees) Kuntze (Burot) and *Indigofera tinctoria* L. also referred as *Sibu*. Teangluma *et al*⁸ suggested that the yield of dye always depends on the soaking time. In order to attain the colour the leaves were pounded to paste, allowed to ferment and dried. The yarn was immersed in it until a consistent blackish dark blue colour was obtained and then sun dried. If the yarn was immersed for a lesser period, the colour obtained was violet. Sometimes the powder of *Justicia comata* (L) Lam (Mirve) or flower of *M. tinctoria* was used to acquire red shade.

Black dye was prepared from *Aporosa octandra* Vickery(Tamsir) leaves immerge with mineral solution. Yarns were repeatedly boiled in the solution until desired shade was obtained. Extract of *Terminalia chebula* Retz. and *T. bellirica* Roxb.(Kuru) and *Phyllanthus emblica* L. (Thelu)fruit were too attained black dye.Natural source of red dye was obtained from the hives (resin) of Lac insects (*Kerria lacca*). It was pressed and boiled with water until an optimal consistency was reached. The cotton or silk yarn was immersed, boiled and kept for 2 or 3days and sun dried for attained the finishing maroon colour. The dye was mainly used in traditional bags, turbans and elderly women cloth. The bark of *Machilus gamblei* King ex Hook.f. was boiled and used as a different source of red dye.

Traditional yellow dyes were acquired from the roots of *Morinda angustifolia* Roxb. (Tarloug), rhizomes of *Curcuma longa* L. (Chong-ut) and stem bark of *Garcinia xanthochymus* Hook.f.. Flower of *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L. (Theching) was used to get orange dye. The process of dyeing was the boiled process similar to the others.

IV. CONCLUSION

The textile and weaving culture of the Karbi community was very rich and resourceful among the communities from Northeast India. The women of the Karbi community have kept this artifact alive for centuries and they were the chief sources of labor into the craft. The *Karbis* have varieties of dresses for every occasion which was unlike any other community and itself depicts the diversity that was inherent. But at the very present outset the usage and production of these traditional artifacts were under precarious condition considering the lack of upgraded and modern production techniques apt for the changing times. However, it also involved an elaborate and time consuming process with less production. Knowledge of embodying customarily

used design was also declining. On the hand the new generations were not much involved into the creation and thriving of this beautiful piece of art. Hence, new opportunity to involve the youth must be formulated. On the other hand, the proper research in strengthening and developing this sector that in turn lead to value addition was also lacking. Therefore, a great need to conserved the traditional craft and culture that recognized the identity of the tribe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Authors are thankful to Director, Rain Forest Research Institute, Jorhat for providing facilities and guidance. The authors are also grateful to the Headman and informants of different village of Karbi Anglong District to share their valuable knowledge and technique. Sincere thanks to Sikharani Engtipi and Saraswati lektheipi and her family of Diphu for providing the important information during the field work.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Bhattachrjee T, Sociology of the Karbis. BR Publishing Corporation, Delhi. 1986
- [2]. Biswas A, Indian Costumes. New Delhi : Publication division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting , Govt of India. 1985.
- [3]. Chetia S, Costumes of Karbi Tribe in Assam Int J Scientific & Engineering Research. 2016; 7(6): 424-427.
- [4]. Ghose GK, Tribal and Their Culture, Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Pub; S.B. Nangia for Ashis Publication House, Punjabi Bagh, New Delhi. 1992.
- [5]. Karolia A & Ladia B, Traditional textile and customs of Karbi and Baite tribes of Meghalaya. Indian J Tradit Knowle. 2012; 11 (2): 309-316
- [6]. Phangcho PC, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills- A study of Geography and Culture. Printwell, Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam, India. 2001.
- [7]. Singh AV, Study on dye yielding plants of the Karbis of Nagaon, Assam. Int J Advanced Research. 2017; 5(7): 382-385.
- [8]. Teangluma A, Teangluma S & Saithongb A, Selection of Indigo Plant Varieties and Other Plants that Yield Indigo Dye. Procedia Engineering.2012; 32: 184-190
- [9]. Teron R & Borthakur SK, Biological motifs and designs on traditional costumes among Karbis of Assam. Indian J Tradit Knowle. 2012; 11(2): 305-308.
- [10]. Teron R & Borthakur SK, Traditional knowledge of herbal dyes and cultural significance of colors among the Karbis Ethnic Tribe in North east India. Ethnobotany Research and Applications. 2012; 10: 593-603.



Women busy in preparing the loom



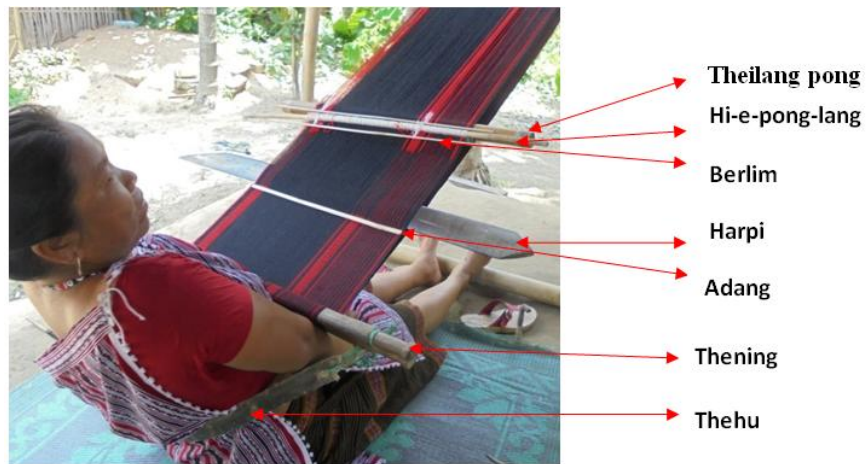


Figure- 1: Different tools required for Karbi handloom



Fig-2 : Some of the nuance into Pekok

A: *Peh- loru pekok* B: *Peh-jangphong pekok* C: *Peh- sarpi pekok* D: *Dophirso pekok* E: *Peh seleng pekok*



Fig-3: Women wearing *Peh sarpi pekok*(left),*Peh loru pekok*(middle) and *Peh jangphong pekok*(right)

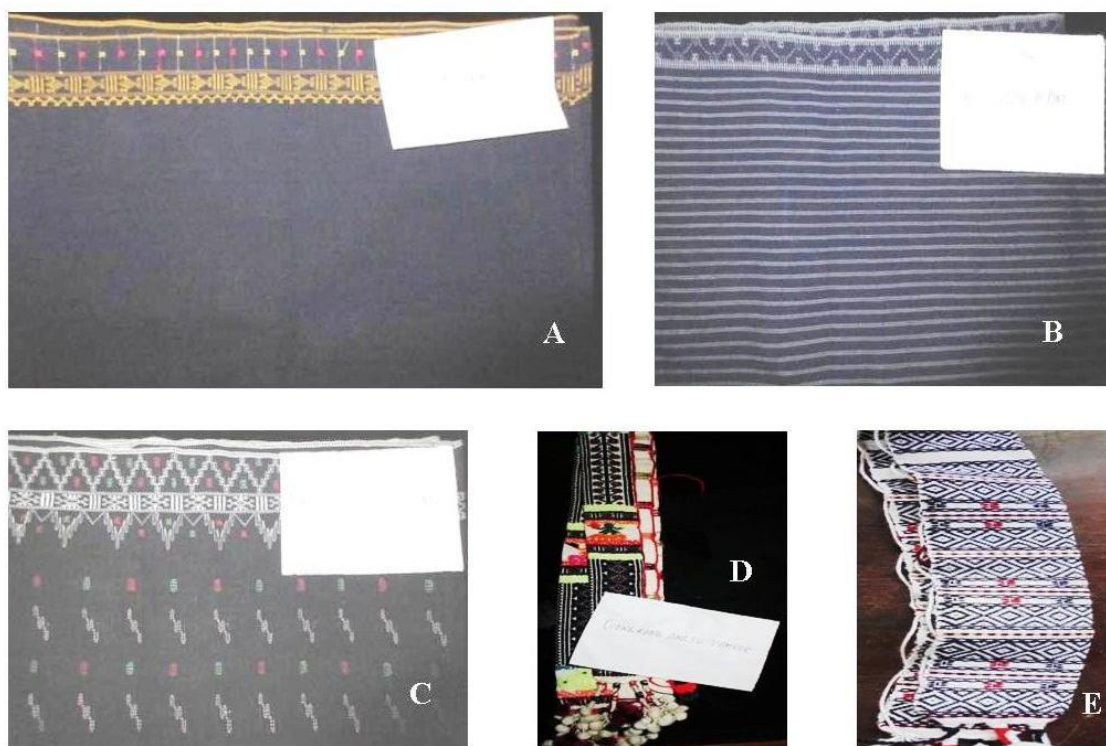


Fig- 4 : Some of the nuance into *pini* and *Vamkok* - A. *Rot ahem apini* B. *Barlim kethom ahi apini* C: *Asantok kejok apini* D: *Vamkok* E: *Phongrong angsu vamkok*



Fig- 5: Traditional Karbi male garments A. *Choi honthor* (Worn by married man), B. *Choi honthor* (Worn by bachelor), C. *Choi ang* (Men Jacket), D. *Risomar poho*, E. *Sarman poho*, F. *Chopang*



Fig- 6: Different products of Karbi looms

A. *Chui* (Traditional), B. *Chui* (Modern), C. *Piba* (Traditional), D. *Piba* (Modern), E. *Sarman jarong*, F. *Jarong*, G. *Pilu*, H. *Pinuku*, I. *Amar kido*



Fig- 7: Karbi traditional ornaments-

A. *Chu sek*, B. *Arnan- ke-et*, C. *Nothengpi*, D. *Rupa-roi & Ke-et- roi*, E. *Lek jinjiri kethe* F. *Lek torte*, G. *Lek hiki*, H. *Lek pengkhar*, L. *Lek pila*, J. *Lek jinjiri* K. *Chui – ari* , L. *Kor-dhuni*,

Kuntala N.Barua, et. al. "Traditional Fashion Festooned With Motifs and Design In Karbi Culture Of Assam, India- A State- Off- Art Report." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(5), 2020, pp. 18-26.