

Kabui –Naga Household Handicrafts: The Mirror of Cultural Identity

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Abstract

The Kabuis (Rongmeis), a recognized Scheduled tribe of Manipur, largely inhabit the hill ranges of Tamenglong District of Manipur since for hundreds of years. Manipur lies under the sub-tropical region, and the majority (92 %) of the various tribal communities inhabit the hill areas of the state. Handicraft products help them to meet the needs of the people in the hilly habitat. Although the world is changing and nothing is static, the role and use of bamboo and cane in the life of the Kabuis remained over time. The material culture of the Kabuis, as other people do, has a close relationship with natural resources available in and around their habitat. Handicrafts are innovative products made by hand's skill without the help of modern machinery and equipment. Strips of bamboo and cane are extensively used to manufacture different utility and decorative items. These eco-friendly products are light in weight and have their style and elegance, and have cultural significance. Different communities around the world have their specific designs of bamboo and cane crafts products. Other materials, such as wood, horn, etc., are also used to prepare utensils for household purposes. The present paper endeavors to study the handicrafts of Kabui- Naga of Manipur with special reference to household purposes.

Keywords: Kabui-Nagas, Cultural identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The crafts of different communities are diverse, rich in culture and identity. For many centuries, crafts have been embedded as a culture and tradition within rural and tribal communities. Kabui- the huge variety of handicrafts manifests naga's rich cultural heritage and centuries of tradition. The word "craft" denotes skill and art and skilled handwork techniques to produce tools, weapons, and artifacts. Handicrafts or crafts have referred to a particular skill or art of making objects by hand (Budha Kamei, 2017). The making of baskets is an age-old craft practiced by the male elders in the traditional rural subsistence economy of Manipur's Kabuis. Bamboo and cane crafts are essential household items like baskets to carry firewood, grain storage, bamboo tubes of water containers, spoons, fishing and hunting trips, etc. Chauhan (1999) reported that out of 126 species of India's bamboos, over 40 species are found in Manipur, and about 15 species are native. Most of these species are economically important to the people of the state. It is also reported that more than 53 species of bamboos are found in Manipur (Devi, 2007).

Because of its innate characters like flexibility, durability, and high growth rate within a few years, man has been used by man since prehistoric times till today. People of Manipur, both hill and valley, use bamboo for different purposes as food while young. They are used for their socio-economic, religious, household needs, weaving, and medicine after they matured. In other words, the role of bamboos in everyday life is immense and commendable. Most of the rural area's old people have the indigenous knowledge about the utility of the different bamboo species and planted around their homestead as demarcation or fencing of their area and used when needed. Bamboos help meet life necessities, i.e., food, fuel, clothing, and shelter, and serve as raw material for many industries such as paper (Negi, 1996).

The Kabui is one of the largest Scheduled tribes of Manipur. Their traditional habitat is the mountain ranges of the Tamenglong District of Manipur. A not very long time ago, quite a several Kabui individuals settled down in Manipur's valley. According to Thaimai Mangthoi (1976), Kabuis is also known as Rongmeis. Kabuis living in the valley who practice wet cultivation and those who inhabit the hilly areas practiced a very simple form of agriculture locally known as *Pamlou* (shifting cultivation). They adopt agriculture as a way of life, but not as a profession.

Moreover, it is also a fact that hunting and fishing are a part of their livelihood though they live with a producing economy. Moreover, their material culture and food habit are closely related to bamboo and cane. All the bamboo implements and objects are made skillfully and used by the people as a handicraft product. Cane and bamboo form the raw materials from which they meet everyday life requirements (Das, 1979).

Basketry is considered to be the main Handicraft of the male folk. Basket weaving and the Kabui tribe were men bonded and passing down hands in change from generation to generation. Elderly male folk engaged themselves in making different kinds of baskets, hunting, fishing, and household implements for their use and sale. Though cultivation is the villagers' main economy, the old male folk spends leisure hours of lean/offseason by preparing household articles of which basketry form a major item. Almost all the implements of weaving are also prepared from bamboo and cane.



II. AIM AND OBJECT

The present paper is based on the study of traditional household purpose handicrafts of the Kabuis of Phungong of Tamenglong District in Manipur. This village is located at a distance of about 143 km to the west of Imphal. It occupies the hilltop situated at an altitude of about 1175 m above the mean sea level.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methods employed in the present study are interview and observation techniques. The craftsmen and elderly persons were interviewed regarding the making techniques and the utilities of bamboo and other material handicrafts for household purposes.

Bamboo Handicrafts

Most of the kitchen utensils like tongs, spoons, and drinking bowls are prepared from bamboo. Nature became the closest to the tribal life, and forest plays an important income source in people's survival. As such, bamboo and cane play an important role in their life. Bamboos made products are antifungal, anti-bacterial, degradable, and renewable products of nature.

Some of the households implement made of bamboo and cane are Bamboo tube (*Hanthai*), Mithun horn weaved with cane strips (*Goi-cheijou-bung*), Bamboo cup (*Humsajjou bong*), Earthen wine pot decorated with cane strips (*Jou-lai*), Fire making wood and bamboo strip (*Maigang, Mailu*), Bamboo stirrer (*La-Tai-Kwak*), Spindle whorl (*Nangmoi*), and Threshing bow (*Langpai*). Besides, several baskets are also used for household purposes.

Hanthai(Bamboo tube): It is a vessel made out of one internode's bamboo so that one node is used as the base of the vessel. It is used for the collection of water. Females generally carry about 5 to 6 *Hanthais* at timekeeping in a carrying basket. It measures about 36cm in length and 10cm in diameter. Bamboo tubes are used, which they bring on their backs in Ka (Rangtang-ka) basket.

Goi-cheijou-bung(Mithun horn): Horn works are a craft produced from the Mithun horns. Mithun horn of reasonable size is used for drinking purposes, especially for rice beer or liquor. Such a horn used as a drinking vessel has a decorative horn guard and is made by weaving cane strips (plate 1).



Plate: 1

Humsajjou bong(Bamboo cup): Bamboo cups of reasonable sizes are also used for drinking purposes, preferably for rice beer or liquor. It measures about 13cm in height and 9.5cm in diameter. They neither used metal nor plastic cups (plate 2).



Plate: 2

Jou-lai(Earthen wine pot): It is an earthen pot usually meant to prepare and keep rice beer while drinking. Cane strips are nicely woven around the pot's body not only for decoration but also for protection. The wine pots found in the valley are larger and not decorated with cane strips. It measures about 25cm in height at the body, and 30cm and 15cm are the diameters at the middle and the mouth of the pot's body (plate 3).



Plate: 3

La-tai-kwak(Bamboo stirrer): It is a paddle or stirrer made of bamboo having two nodes. One node is made into a spoon-shaped structure, whereas the other node that tapers towards the end forms the handle. It measures about 36 cm in length (plate 4).



Plate: 4

Although agriculture is the primary occupation of the villagers, some villagers practiced basketry as their main occupation. Bamboo and cane basketry are an intrinsic part of daily life activities. They used dao and a piece of pointed split bamboo as their tool in making baskets. Considering the function, the whole range of baskets used by the Kabui people are classified as-

i) Carrying basket, ii) Storing basket, iii) Receptacles, iv) Drying baskets, v) Container cum measuring, vi) Mat and vii) Miscellaneous. Based on the shapes and techniques, these baskets are further classified.

i) Carrying basket a. Carrying basket (Kaluang): It is a carrying basket made of bamboo cane and fiber of bimlijute (*Gankheng*). It is somewhat conical in shape and measures about 48cm in height and 38cm in diameter at the mouth. Both males and females use it for carrying paddy and rice. While carrying the basket, the strap made of *Gankhengriang* and cane attached to the basket is placed upon the head. The weaving pattern of the basket is twilling type. Its capacity is about 25 kg (plate 5-A).

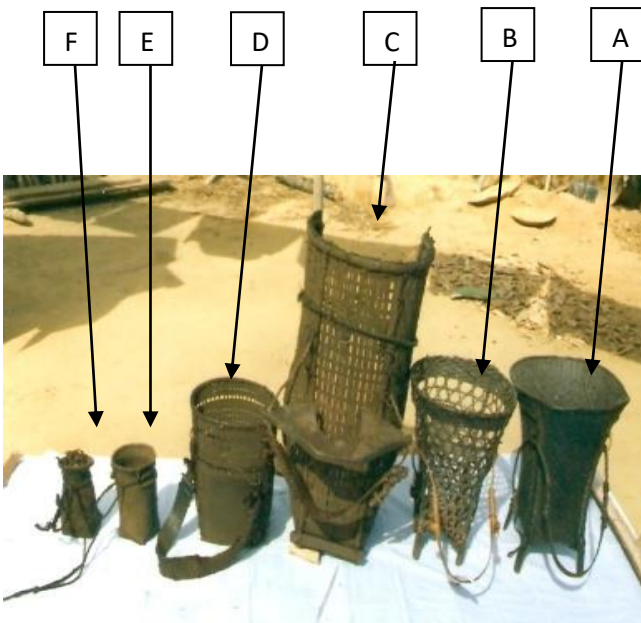


Plate: 5 (A- F)

b. Carrying basket (Rangtang-ka / ka-Kui): It is also a carrying basket made of the same materials as in *Kaluang*. It is somewhat conical in shape and measures about 36 cm in height and 46 cm in diameter at the mouth. Both males and females use it for carrying firewood. Females use this basket to collect vegetables and fetch water to keep the bamboo tubes or containers in the basket. While carrying the basket, the strap made of *Gankhengriang* and cane attached to the basket is placed upon the head. The weaving pattern of the basket is open hexagonal type. This basket is an important item of dowry among the Kabuis(Plate 5 -B).

c. Paddy with stalk carrying basket (Nappurak): It is made of bamboo, cane, and wood. It is generally used by the villagers in the jhum field during harvesting to carry the bunch of paddy stalk. The basket's shape is more or less cylindrical and tapers slightly towards the bottom, resting on a rectangular base frame. One side of it is opened longitudinally to facilitate its volume size. It is usually carried by placing the strap attached to the basket upon the head with the basket resting on the back. The person carrying such baskets' normal posture is inclined at an angle of about 30° to 45°. To ease carrying heavily laden baskets, they use a shoulder-length wooden appliance fixed to the strap. This appliance is placed horizontally on the nape of the neck but mainly borne by the shoulder. Normally such a basket measures 79cm in height, with a diameter of about 38cm (plate 5-C).

ii) Storing basket

Storing basket (Khok): It is a storing basket made of bamboo and cane. It is somewhat conical in shape and measures about 82cm in height and 46cm in diameter at the mouth. It consists of two parts- a larger body having a conical shape and a pointed lid. Two types of such baskets are found - one for storing clothes and the other for storing ornaments. The former is an essential item of dowry (Plate 6&7).



Plate: 6 (cloth storing basket)



Plate: 7 (ornament storing basket)

iii) Receptacles Small basket (Kampho): It is a small receptacle made of bamboo and cane strips and used by the womenfolk at the time of sowing seed. It measures about 20cm in height and about 12cm in diameter at the mouth (plate 5-E &F).



Plate: 8

iv) Drying baskets (Ghou): It is a rounded basket made of bamboo split measuring about 90 cm. in diameter. It is mainly used for drying beans, chili, and vegetables in the sun. Another type of basket used for drying paddy made of a bamboo split in close twilling technique is *Ghou*. It measures about 2 meters in diameter (Plate 8).

v) Containercum measuring basket: It is a small rectangular basket made by the twilling technique and used for measuring the daily consumption of rice. Another type of basket used for measuring paddy and keeping daily needs is known as (*Giu*) (Plate 9).



Plate: 9(*Giu*)

vi) Mat (Thing-tha): It is a rectangular mat made of the bamboo split in twilling technique, used for sitting purpose. It measures about 2 meter in length and 1 meter in the breadth. Another flexible mat somewhat larger in size is used as a threshing mat in shifting cultivation.

iii. Winnowing fan (Pantang-ru): It is an oval-shaped basket made of bamboo split by twilling technique. It measures about 80 cm. in length and is used to remove the husk and socio-religious functions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Handicrafts can be considered as markers and practices of cultural identity and ethnicity. A particular set of handicraft items are never exactly similar to those of another group of people. The Skills of craftsman are handed down from one generation to another. The Kabuis used the bamboo and cane resources to lead a successful living by establishing a harmonious relationship with the habitat. Not only for household purposes, but almost all the implements of cultivation were also hunting and fishing prepared from bamboo plants and cane. Bamboo is strong and durable. It is safe and hygienic.

Moreover, bamboo is great for the environment since it absorbs more carbon dioxide than other trees. To put it differently, bamboo cannot be separated from the Kabui life-ways. Life would have been very difficult; rather, our cultural evolution might have taken a paradigm shift without this heaven-sent grass since prehistoric times.

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