

RESEARCH PAPER

Traditional motifs of Dimasas in Dima Hasao District, Assam: An insight into their origin and use by the traditional women weavers

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ABSTRACT

The traditional costume of a community is indicative of its identity, livelihood patterns and social and cultural beliefs. They are the aesthetic expressions of the rich cultural traditions. They give an idea about the ethnicity, profession and traditional knowledge of the community. It has been observed that traditional costumes are often decorated with motifs depicting various kinds of plants and animals or their parts, inanimate objects and in some cases abstract art. Weaving is done exclusively by the Dimasa women in their household looms. The cotton yarn or silk yarn is mostly produced in their household farms. The present study documents 82 traditional motifs of the Dimasa weavers from Dima Hasao district. Out of this, 46 motifs have been identified and their origins have been successfully traced. Data was gathered through snowball sampling and personal observations. The study highlights the close relationship that this tribe shares with nature.

Keywords: Motifs, Costumes, Dimasa, Dima Hasao, Weaving, Traditional knowledge

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Introduction

North East India has the unique distinction of having more than 100 tribal communities that dominate the total population. It can be considered as a power house of handicrafts wherein each region is replete with different traditional crafts. The traditional textiles and costumes of each tribe of the region strengthen communal solidarity and beliefs (Gosh and Ghosh, 2000). The treasure of tribal arts and crafts of North East India is immense and has an astounding range, diversity and beauty (Sengupta, 2002).

Weaving technique is exclusively practiced by women in the Dimasa community. Weaving is a part and parcel of the society. Almost every girl of the Dimasa household is trained to weave right from her childhood. Most of the domestic clothes from daily wear to costumes designed for special events are weaved in the traditional family looms called 'Daophang'. 'Dao' is to weave and 'phang' is plant. They weave their costumes on the loom which they set up in their houses. The traditional costumes with distinctive colour, motifs and designs not only reflect the cultural identity of the community but are also indicative of the rich cultural heritage and traditional knowledge that the tribe has (Karolia and Ladia, 2012). In fact, the traditional motifs are elements of pattern, image, or part of one or more

themes. It can be an idea that includes lines in various forms, such as vertical, horizontal, recurring shapes or colours, diagonal and curved. Many man-made objects are also drawn using geometrical shape such as lines, circle, squares, rectangle, triangle (Anonymous). The main objective of the present work was to find the relationship of the tribe with various elements of nature that is evident in their traditional costume.

Methods

The present study was carried out in 2012-2015 among the Dimasa women weavers of Dima Hasao district, Assam (Fig. 1). The study was done through semi-structured questionnaires and personal observation. For this study, three villages were selected using snowball sampling. These villages were selected because the practice of weaving traditional costumes was relatively more prevalent in these villages. Prior Informed Consent (PIC) was gathered from informants. A group discussion was conducted with all the women weavers for better understanding about the reason behind the traditional costume motifs. Photographs were taken to support the study.

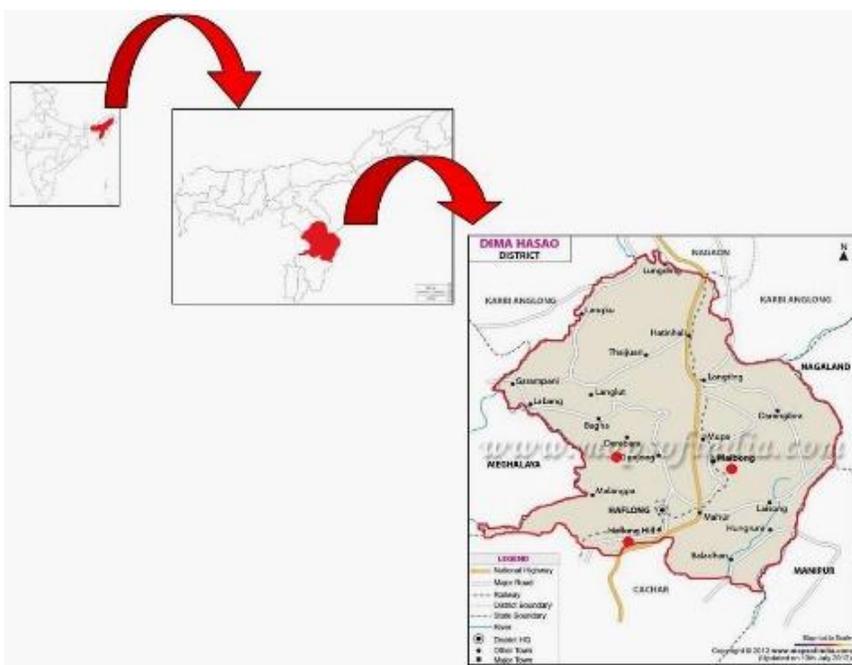


Figure 1: Study Area

Results

The motifs of traditional dresses varied. For ease of understanding, these were broadly divided into four categories *viz.* flora, fauna, object and abstract figures. Flora included all type of plants or plant parts, whereas

fauna included all forms of animals. The category object included all inanimate things like tools, items made out of wood, etc. The last category that is abstract figures included those figures that were created by blending two or more figures (Table 1).

Table 1. Motifs that gives an idea how community is inspired from nature

Dimasa name	Scientific name/Family (if any)	English name	Motifs
Bikhrisa	X	Outgrowth	Abstract
Yerba	X	Flourish	Abstract
Jengrengsa	X	Messy/ Disorder	Abstract
Aakhi bubar	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L./ Poaceae	Puffed rice	Floral
Bathai-sa	X	Small fruit	Floral
Bon gur/Bon gur daingsle	X	Bark of tree	Floral
Gala bathai	<i>Momordica charantia</i> L./ Cucurbitaceae	Bitter gourd	Floral
Gisiplai	<i>Borassus flabellifer</i> L./ Arecaceae	Asian Palmyra palm	Floral
'Khalong'	<i>Oroxylum indicum</i> (L.) Kurz/ Bignoniaceae	Indian trumpet flower	Floral
'Khalong bar'		Bud	Floral
'Khalong gadain'		Tender shoot	Floral
Lai sepsa	X	Bundle of leaves	Floral
'Phantao'	<i>Solanum melongena</i> L./ Solanaceae	Brinjal	Floral
'Phantao gibim'		Whole fruit	Floral
'Phantao bar'		Bud	Floral
'Phrap phang'	<i>Ficus</i> sp./ Moraceae	Banyan tree	Floral
'Phrap phang bathai'		Fruit	Floral
'Phrap phang bokhro'		Canopy	Floral
'Phrap phang bokhro basa'		Small canopy	Floral
'Phrap phang gidiba'		Big <i>Ficus</i> tree	Floral

'Phrap phang gojo' 'Phrap phang yakhri basa' 'Phrap phang yakhri gidiba'		Half canopy of <i>Ficus</i> tree Plant with small root system Plant with vigorous root system	Floral Floral Floral
'Rdao' 'Rdao lai' 'Rdao thai'	<i>Ricinus communis</i> L./ Euphorbiaceae	Castor plant Leaf Fruit	Floral Floral Floral
Satrai bar	<i>Canarium resiniferum</i> Bruce ex King/ Burseraceae	Fruit of <i>Canarium</i>	Floral
Sham berma	<i>Ageratum conyzoides</i> (L.) L./ Compositae	Grass	Floral
Sham thai	<i>Urena lobata</i> L./ Malvaceae	Grass	Floral
Thai jai	X	Eight number of fruits	Floral
Thai ji	X	Ten number of fruits	Floral
Thaidi bar	<i>Dillenia indica</i> L./ Dilleniaceae	Fruit of <i>Dillenia</i>	Floral
Thaisru bar gidiba	<i>Diospyros kaki</i> L. f./ Ebenaceae	Fruit of <i>Diospyros</i>	Floral
Yaosgu gbai	<i>Cissus quadrangularis</i> L./ Vitaceae	Whole plant	Floral
Mih-sha	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i> Zimmermann/ Cervidae	Barking deer	Faunal
Moso	<i>Cervus equinus</i> Cuvier./ Cervidae	Sambar	Faunal
Miyung	<i>Elephas maximus</i> Linnaeus/ Elephantidae	Elephant	Faunal
Daama	X	Butterfly	Faunal
Mojo	X	Mouse	Faunal
'Baitha'	X	Boat oar	Object
'Baitha khoro'	X	Tip of oar	Object
Bla	X	Arrow	Object
Didik gidiba	X	Big vessel	Object
Disrik kharnai	X	Pond of Disrik, a Dimasa Princess	Object
Khamphlai bondo	X	Wooden stool	Object
Madaikho gadain	X	New Temple	Object

From the present study, a total of 82 traditional motifs were recorded. Out of this, floral designs amounted to 42% of the total which is the highest number followed by unidentified designs (39%), objects (9%), faunal (6%) and abstract art (4%). Unidentified designs were those that

were being weaved but their origin was unknown to respondents (Fig.2). Different types of flowers such as brinjal flower, bitter gourd flower, etc. were depicted in a highly stylized way.

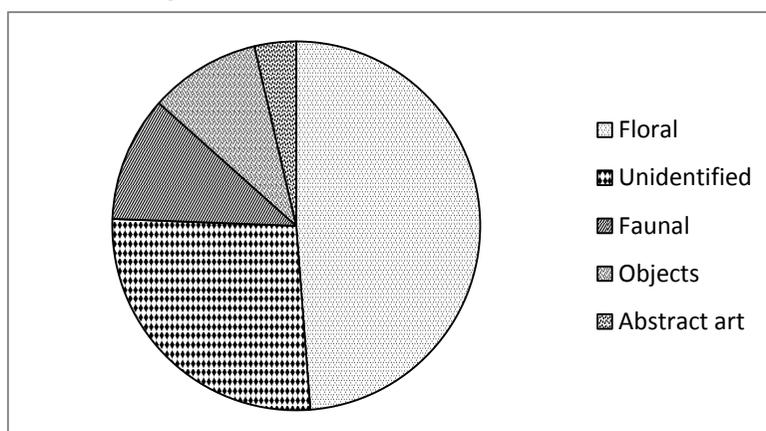


Figure 2. Different types of motifs found in Dimasa weaving.



Figure 3. A Dimasa woman weaving 'Daophang.



Figure 4. Phantao bar: Flower of Brinjal (*Solanum melongena* L.)



Figure 5. Aakhi bubar: Puffed rice (*Oryza sativa* L.).

Discussion

Floral motifs were the most popular motifs preferred by both the weavers and the users. These motifs included flowers, creepers, sprays, springs, plants etc. These natural motifs are weaved in a symmetrical pattern. Sometimes other elements such as lines were added between the motifs to give additional symmetry and beauty to the design. These motifs not only show different patterns and styles but also the interest and the moods of different weavers. Both natural and abstract motifs were derived from similar sources such as flowers and leaves etc., but results would be quite different. The natural motifs of a leaf looked like a leaf but an abstract motif of the same could be created by only using the texture, veins, patterns or colour to produce attractive motifs.

The style and pattern of clothing are very traditional and cultural. Both men and women wear costumes designed in household loom. The motifs for female dresses differ from that of the males. Female clothing on special occasions (such as marriage, festival) consisted of three parts: 'Ri-khaosa' (chest wrapper), 'Ri-jam-phain' (chest to knees), 'Ri-gu' (drapery or lower garment). Male clothing consists of 'Sgaopha' (Turban), 'Rigodo' (maffler), 'Ri-sha' (waist to knee). 'Ri-thap' is a shawl woven for both male and female.

The Dimasas 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, birds and animals. The motifs in border of a draper called 'Rigu' that are woven in the Dimasa clothes are very unique. The various designs and patterns on the clothes are made by tying the threads and rest of the cloth is woven normally. Therefore the motifs appear elevated on the cloth and give a 3 dimensional feel upon touching. Unlike motifs of other community which is usually made of either one or two colours, the Dimasas add three or more colours to their motifs. This adds extra colour and vibrance to the cloth weaved by the Dimasa community. Most of the clothes are woven from cotton yarn but nowadays many synthetic yarns are available in the market with variety of colours. Only some specific cloth like 'Ri-thap' (warm shawl) are woven from 'Yungma' or 'Endi' (*Samia cynthia*). The cloth from this silk worm is called 'Ri-endi' in Dimasa'. They have a tradition in rearing silkworm *Samia cynthia* in their home yards. The Dimasas grow cotton and make thread out of it with the help of a manual device called 'Khun-thon'. This

process is called 'Khun-looba'. It has also been observed that some motifs are related to the folklores. For instance, 'Dishru Kharnai,' where 'Dishru' is the name of a beautiful Dimasa princess and 'Kharnai' is pond. It depicts the pond where Princess Dishru used to bathe.

There are as many as 82 motifs recorded but the source and origin of many motifs were not recognised by the weavers themselves. This can be attributed to the degradation of traditional knowledge and society due to modernisation. The people of this region are now moving away from the traditional weaving practices and hence the knowledge on the techniques are also depleting rapidly. In order to conserve and promote this unique craft of the Dimasa community, there should be some incentives offered to the craftsman from various governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Conclusion

In olden days weaving was not solely for one's own family requirements. However today they are weaving products for sale to supplement their household income. The study reveals the emotional attachment between women of the Dimasa tribe and nature since the time immemorial. It exhibits a deep rooted knowledge about nature and its artefacts amongst the weavers. All these artefacts were observed and then incorporated in the motifs of the traditional costumes. Such a practice helped in spreading awareness not only about the local flora and fauna but also about the rich folklores of the Dimasa community, thus helping in conservation of both the biological resources as well as the rich cultural knowledge.

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