

The Past and Future of the Traditional Clothing and Food of the Dimasas - An Analytical Discussion

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Abstract: The traditional clothing and food of the Dimasas, a tribal community in Assam, reflect the essence of civilization and the dynamic nature of societal progress. Despite the absence of written records, their cultural legacy endures, rooted in their linguistic affiliation with the Assamese-Burmese branch of the Greater Chand Tibetan language family. The term "Dimah" or "Dimashi" symbolizes their connection to riverside communities, suggesting origins traced back to Miridapur. The dispersion of Dimas across various regions has significantly influenced Assamese culture, notably through their unique rain-culture practices. The evolution of Dimas' attire and cuisine serves as a testament to their resilience and adaptability amidst cultural transformations. Their clothing reflects a blend of tradition and adaptation, mirroring changes in societal dynamics, while their cuisine embodies a fusion of ancestral recipes with contemporary influences. Through these cultural elements, the Dimas have preserved their identity and shaped their collective resilience in the face of evolving times. In essence, the journey of Dimas' civilization is intricately woven into the fabric of their traditional clothing and food, illustrating a balance between heritage and adaptation. This narrative highlights the enduring importance of these cultural elements in shaping collective identity and resilience within the Dimasa community.

Keywords: Civilization, Assamese Culture, Traditional Cloth, Community.

INTRODUCTION

The Dimasa tribe, primarily residing in the North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, and Nagaon districts of South-eastern Assam, as well as in Dimapur, Nagaland, boasts a rich history that stretches back into antiquity. What sets them apart is their steadfast preservation of age-old customs, rituals, attire, and culinary traditions, a testament to their profound cultural conservatism. Remarkably, the Dimasas have upheld their traditional way of life, including

distinctive practices in bamboo and cane craftsmanship, intricate weaving patterns, unique silver jewelry designs, and the art of brewing rice beer. These elements collectively showcase the tribe's vibrant material culture, reflecting their deep-rooted connection to tradition and heritage. Bamboo holds a revered status among the Dimasas, often referred to as the "green gold" of the North East, as noted by Singh (2013). Within their community, the craft of basket making is exclusively reserved for men and boys, with each household producing its own baskets for various purposes. With an abundance of bamboo and cane in their surroundings, the Dimasas exhibit a natural expertise in this craft. The Dimasa people are one of the ethnic groups that have lived in Assam since ancient times. The Dimasas are the original inhabitants of Assam based on their festivals, oral literature and events in the Assam Buranji, Tunkhungia Buranji, Satsari Buranji, Jaintia Buranji, Kachari Buranji etc. As a linguistic group, the Dimasas belong to the Assamese-Burmese branch of the Tibetan language family of the larger Sino-Tibetan language family. The Dimasas call themselves the children of the Barnai or the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. The word Dimasa or Dimaphisa means D-water, Ma-great, Sha-child. This means that the people living on the banks of the big rivers are the Dimasas. According to historical sources, they originated from Hirimbapur or present-day Dimapur. There is a legend that the descendants of Ghatot Kash, son of Hirimba, were the Dimasa Kacharis. The Dimasas, who currently live in various parts of North Kachar, Karbi Anglong and Nagaon districts of Assam, have contributed to the formation of a large foundation of Assamese culture with their own culture. Since the past, Dimasa women have been weaving clothes for their own use and supplying them to every member of the family. Dimasa teenagers (Matlasi) learn by sight from their old mothers how to weave cotton, wash cotton or cut

panji. They do everything from spinning to weaving clothes in the cotton mills. In Dimasa society, no young man marries a cluster woman; They want a judge who can help her husband run the household by weaving many clothes that can help him economically in addition to the necessities of the household. It is essential that every household has a few weaving mills. In the dresses worn by women rather than men, they choose flowers and weave them on the loom. For example, the colorful flower patterns of 'Rizampai' worn on the mekhela in Bihu dance are admirable. The women made dyes from the leaves, bark, flowers and seeds of various trees and dyed their own hand-cut yarn to weave clothes. However, nowadays colored yarn is very easily available in the market, so the traditional dyeing practice is on the verge of extinction. Dimasa Gavar has its own flower patterns and they are called Vin Vindiduh, Deshru Kanai, Hamun Kampla Bagu, Paltaobar (eggplant flower painting), Gisir (mattress shaped flower) etc. The Dimasa girls make many designs like Gayayadeb, Samtaimun, Dilam Batai, Dilam Balai, Prabso, Baina etc. on the thinness of their mekhela.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach to examine the historical, cultural, and socio-economic aspects of the traditional clothing and food practices among the Dimasa tribe of Assam. The research draws upon a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to gather and analyze data. Firstly, historical and ethnographic research methods are utilized to explore the origins, evolution, and cultural significance of Dimasa traditional clothing and food. This involves a comprehensive review of existing literature, including academic publications, historical texts, and oral narratives from Dimasa elders. Fieldwork forms a crucial component of this study, allowing for firsthand observation and data collection. Ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions are conducted within Dimasa communities in the North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, and Nagaon districts of Assam, as well as in Dimapur, Nagaland. These interactions provide insights into contemporary practices, attitudes, and perceptions regarding traditional clothing and food among the Dimasas.

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the historical and cultural significance of traditional clothing and food among the Dimasa tribe of Assam.
2. To examine the resilience and adaptability of Dimasa cultural practices in the face of modernization and external influences.
3. To explore the socio-economic and environmental factors influencing the production and preservation of traditional Dimasa artifacts, such as bamboo crafts, weaving, and silver jewelry.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Dimasa traditional dress, characterized by intricate weaving and symbolic motifs, serves as a vibrant expression of identity and craftsmanship. Despite the advent of commercially dyed yarns and changing fashion sensibilities, the essence of Dimasa weaving persists, adapting to modern times while preserving its core elements.

Similarly, Dimasa cuisine reflects a deep-rooted connection with the environment, utilizing locally sourced ingredients in a sustainable manner. While modern lifestyles have introduced new food items and preparation methods, the traditional flavors and communal eating practices continue to thrive, underscoring the community's commitment to its culinary heritage. The resilience of Dimasa clothing and food traditions can be attributed to several factors: Strong community pride and a sense of identity motivate the preservation of traditional practices.

The community has shown adaptability, incorporating modern elements into traditional practices without losing their essence. The passing down of knowledge and skills from elders to the younger generation plays a critical role in the continuity of traditions. Shared traditions and communal practices reinforce social bonds and collective identity. Baskets of diverse shapes and sizes serve myriad functions, from simple receptacles hastily fashioned for immediate use to intricately woven containers designed for transporting rice from the fields to homes. Among the essential bamboo creations are specialized tools like the "Chani," a V-shaped strainer crucial for separating solid particles from rice beer, and the "Yengthi," a spacious bamboo cylinder utilized for filtering suspended solids from larger containers of rice beer.

Additionally, the "Damakho," a smoking pipe crafted from solid bamboo, stands as another significant creation in Dimasa culture. These bamboo artifacts not only showcase the tribe's skilled craftsmanship but also underscore the practical ingenuity deeply ingrained in their daily lives. While seemingly simple in appearance, crafting bamboo instruments requires meticulous attention to detail to ensure their functionality. For instance, the "Damakho," a smoking pipe, consists of a bamboo tube punctured to accommodate a smaller vertical piece, where an earthen container or chillum containing tobacco and burning charcoal is placed.

Another traditional Dimasa item is the "Khojong Dima," a comb fashioned from a specific bamboo species called "washi." Elaborately engraved with decorative designs, this comb transforms into a work of art, measuring 255mm in length, 85cm in width, and weighing approximately 50 grams. The "Pontho" serves as a cylindrical bamboo container for safeguarding seeds for future cultivation. Constructed from a specialized bamboo type, its surface is meticulously scraped to prevent seed spoilage due to inadequate aeration. Similarly, the "Khaujeb," a small basket crafted from fine bamboo or cane strips, showcases exquisite craftsmanship, often adorned with decorative lids and legs for stability. Primarily used for storing valuables, cotton, yarn, and weaving materials, these baskets are meticulously crafted pieces of functional art. The "Jembai," another popular basket type, serves as a handy carrier for smaller objects, ideal for transporting refreshments to fields or camp-sites. Additionally, it plays a role in cultural practices such as transporting rice beer and salt to a bride's house during wedding ceremonies. For practical purposes, the "Dikhang," a woven cane basket, is utilized for carrying water pots. Its hexagonal shape and perforated half-solid canes make it suitable for this task, with a design conducive to being carried on the back using a forehead strap. Beyond utilitarian purposes, bamboo holds significant cultural importance in Dimasa rituals, particularly in marriage and death ceremonies. During funeral rites, the deceased is bathed ceremonially and placed on a bier made of split bamboo called "Bangfong." The intricacy of the bier's design, crafted by skilled laborers, reflects the social status of the deceased, with attention to detail to create an aesthetically pleasing final product resembling a net-covered bamboo box.

Weaving stands as a paramount artistic endeavor within Dimasa culture, producing textiles renowned for their fine quality, vibrant colors, and exceptional durability. Historical accounts suggest that the Dimasas were pioneers in silk cultivation in Assam, showcasing their early mastery of textile craftsmanship. Reserved exclusively for women and girls, spinning and weaving are regarded as essential tasks within Dimasa society, with young brides expected to weave their own wedding attire. Employing traditional looms known as "Dauphang," Dimasa women engage in the intricate process of weaving, known as "Daophang Dauba." These primitive throw shuttle looms are manually operated, allowing for the creation of exquisite cloth by skilled hands. The designs adorning Dimasa textiles often feature intricate motifs inspired by flowers and animals, reflecting the deep connection between the tribe and its natural surroundings. Additionally, Dimasa women exhibit proficiency in the art of dyeing, sourcing colors from locally available juices extracted from shrubs and herbs. This traditional dyeing process adds depth and richness to their already remarkable textile creations, further highlighting the ingenuity and creativity of Dimasa artisans. In addition to their vibrant traditional attire, the Dimasa people adorn themselves with a variety of jewelry, each piece adding to their colorful appearance. Among the men, the choice of ornamentation is relatively minimal, typically limited to the "yaocher" and "kharik." In contrast, Dimasa women embellish themselves with a diverse array of jewelry. These include the "phowal," a silver necklace, the "khamaothai," gold earrings, the "chandrawal," a silver necklace, and the "rangbarsa," a necklace crafted from silver coins. They also wear the "khadu," a substantial silver bracelet, the "eansidam," a silver nose ring, the "li-ksim," a neckpiece adorned with red beads, and the "jonsham," a necklace fashioned from natural beads sourced from the forest.

Each piece of jewelry holds significance within Dimasa culture, serving not only as adornment but also as symbols of tradition, status, and identity. Through their choice of jewelry, the Dimasa people express their rich heritage and distinctive sense of style. The art of producing household liquor stands as a significant indigenous knowledge system within the Dimasa tribe, playing a central role in their socio-cultural life. From joyous celebrations to solemn

ceremonies, rice beer, known as "Ju," holds a pivotal position in Dimasa traditions. "Ju" is not merely a beverage but an integral aspect of Dimasa life, accompanying individuals from birth to death. It is typically made from rice or sticky rice and comes in two main varieties: "judima," which boasts a sweet flavor, and "ju-haro," known for its slightly sour taste and stronger potency. Beyond its role in festivities, "Ju" is believed to possess medicinal properties, serving as a remedy for various ailments and holding ethno-medicinal value within Dimasa culture. Additionally, it holds great ceremonial significance, often being the most prized offering to guests during gatherings and rituals. For example, during the traditional ritual known as "nana dihonba," which marks the birth of a child, a drop of "ju-dima" is placed on the baby's lips along with puffed rice. This ritual underscores the importance of "Ju" in initiating individuals into Dimasa customs from a young age. Furthermore, during marriage ceremonies, "ju-dima" plays a vital role, being an essential component of various rituals associated with the union. Its presence symbolizes hospitality, celebration, and the forging of bonds between families. Overall, "Ju" holds a multifaceted significance within Dimasa society, serving as more than just a beverage but as a symbol of tradition, hospitality, and cultural identity, deeply ingrained in every aspect of Dimasa life.

CONCLUSION

While the traditional ornaments of the Dimasa people predominantly consist of silver, it's intriguing to note that silver is not naturally abundant in the North Cachar Hills region where they reside. This has led scholars like Nicholas Rhodes to theorize that the silver used in Dimasa ornaments likely originated from trade with neighboring regions, particularly Burma in the East. This observation underscores the intricate web of cultural exchange and trade that has shaped Dimasa society over the centuries. Despite geographical constraints, the Dimasa people have managed to preserve their unique identity through the retention of traditional material culture, including their distinct silver jewelry. In essence, the Dimasa tribe serves as a living museum of material culture, a testament to their resilience in maintaining their heritage amidst the pressures of modernity. Their ability to uphold traditional practices and artifacts

reflects a commitment to preserving their cultural identity for future generations, safeguarding against the encroachment of modern influences. The Dimasa people's journey through the ages reveals a remarkable balance between preserving their rich cultural heritage and adapting to the changing world. Their traditional dress and food not only survive but thrive, adapting in ways that respect the past while embracing the future. This study underscores the importance of cultural resilience and adaptability, offering insights into the broader human experience of navigating tradition and change. The Dimasa people's journey through the ages reveals a remarkable balance between preserving their rich cultural heritage and adapting to the changing world. Their traditional dress and food not only survive but thrive, adapting in ways that respect the past while embracing the future. This study underscores the importance of cultural resilience and adaptability, offering insights into the broader human experience of navigating tradition and change.

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