

Exploring the Material Cultural Tradition of Cowrie Shells Among the Dimasas of Assam

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Abstract

Material cultural traditions the integral part of Tribal cultural heritage which get transmitted throughout generations. The Dimasas are dwelling in the states of Assam and Nagaland. They have a number of mythical beliefs and stories passed on throughout generations, mostly by oral traditions. Ranging from the story behind the origin of human beings to those reigning of the Dimasa kings, from the connection with characters of the Mahabharata to the stories of the common Dimasa people. These bear immensely important symbolic meaning in the cultural tradition of the Dimasas. In this regard, Cowrie shells used to play a very significant symbolic role in the daily livelihood activities of the Dimasas. They were used in medium of exchange, amulets and as well as a medicine.

How far such traditions are being followed today by them? Whether the younger generations are well aware about these traditions or it is getting merely confined among their parental generations only. The present study attempts to highlight some of those significant myths, legends and folktales, as well as the significance of Cowrie shells, as noticed among the Dimasas of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao district of Assam. The paper is mainly based on primary data collected through empirical field work by applying appropriate methods.

Key Words: Myths; Legends; Oral Tradition; *Shamanaiba*; *Hoja*; Beads.

Introduction

In its broadest sense, “culture” refers to the whole range of human activities which are learned and not instinctive, and which are transmitted from generation to generation through various learning processes. Often the physical products of human activity are included under the term as “material culture” (1).

Since prehistoric times, man had to develop some technology by which he did exploit the natural resources available in the environment and fulfilled his aspirations for better living. In the wake of technological know-how man’s cultural life began. At the beginning man began to make tools from stone, bones, bamboo,

cane etc. From this simple technology man had developed a complex technology which had led it to the modern civilization. This view has been extended and yet put in a summarized form by David Bidney (1953) who defined culture as the products of agrofacts (products of cultivation), artifacts (products of industry), socifacts (social organization) and mentifacts (language, religion, art and so on) (1). Culture has two aspects- material and non-material. Material culture refers to the physical objects, resources and spaces that people use to define their culture. Manufactured objects such as tools, weapons, means of communication, clothes, utensils, houses and so forth are manifestations of material culture. Material culture

is the physical evidence of a culture in the objects and architecture they make, or have made. The term tends to be relevant only in archaeological and anthropological studies, but it specifically means all material evidence which can be attributed to culture, past or present. Material culture studies are an interdisciplinary field telling of relationships between people and their things: the making, history, preservation, and interpretation of objects.

The term 'material culture' emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and we acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity. Objects range in scale and size from discrete items such as a pencil, key, coin or spoon, through to complex, network objects such as an airliner, motor vehicle, shopping mall or computer. Traditionally, however, the term material culture has referred to smaller objects that are portable. Although scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied objects, their uses and meanings since the beginnings of modern social science scholarship, it is only in relatively recent times that the field of 'material culture studies' has been articulated as an area of inquiry as viewed by (2).

In the material culture of the Tribal people, beads are immensely important. It can be regarded as a tiny, ornamental object that is used to pierce with a small hole through a specialized thread or flexible wire and the sizes of a bead are generally ranges from 1 mm (0.039 in) to over 1 cm (0.39 in) in diameter (3). Beads are minute, attractive and colourful frequently standardized in expensive and often quite beautiful which can be worn as necklaces as ornaments that can be arranged in continual pattern, known to be universal and one of the oldest appearance of human behavioural tradition i.e., from the time immemorial usage of bead is a common mode of ornamentation of the people. Regarding materials, beads are of different varieties such as ivory, animal teeth, shell, wood, stone, clay, mineral, glass etc. of different shape, size and colour. Ancient beads of different time period are still visible as beaded ornaments among different tribes mostly in Asian part of regions in their social life (4).

Beads have been the tiniest artefacts that human ever had as antique in their cultural and historic context. The study on beads has occupied a long journey as an interdisciplinary field with its own intend and technique (5). In India traditional beaded necklaces used by the tribal hierarchy with their material usage and techniques of making have undoubtedly attract and helpful to archaeologists and ethnographers in order to interpret material set-up and human interference in the life pattern of a society (6). In any society, a bead becomes futile or meaningless object if there is no personal consciousness (7). The findings of excavated beads from Harappa which was analyzed on the basis of ranking on raw material and technology i.e. the terracotta and bone beads made from simple technology and material locally available were regarded as the lowest rank. On the other hand, shell, unfired steatite, stone beads made from exotic raw material with relatively simple technologies were of middle rank and beads made of fired

steatite, faience, carnelian, copper, gold with complex technologies were of the highest rank. Likewise, the ranks were also given to this bead makers or artisans (8). In ancient time beads were interpreted and utilized in social respects as well as religious matter (9). Beads are a valuable object which reveals and help to reconstruct the cultural history of a society (6), which has its own symbolic interpretation.

Anthropologists explore the symbolic meanings of an objects and action which is attached to different cultural behaviour through its own observation and techniques (10). One of the symbolic object Cowrie shell was a main accumulation in Maldiv Island in Indian Ocean which was traded in early times to Southeast Asia and beyond. It is clear from the earlier research that the Cowrie shells means to valuable object (11). It is interesting to know that far beyond the sea shore in different parts of the world the two types of Cowrie shells - *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypaea annulus* plays a significant role as a symbol of wealth, medium of exchange and religious accessory since time immemorial (12). Towards the 19th century these marine Cowrie shells were traded from Indian Ocean by some traders to the tribes of Northeast India having its monetary as well as symbolic functional value (11). It is evident from the archaeological research that the Dimasa tribe of Assam uses Cowrie shell as a significant value (3).

A Brief Note on the Dimasas

The Dimasas are regarded as one of the autochthonous communities who are dwelling in the Northeastern region of India. They are mostly settled in the two hills districts of Assam that is, Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong as well as in the neighbouring district of Nagaon, Hojai in Assam. They are patriarchal in nature and follow the patrilineal rule of descent respectively. Every Dimasa people observe the rites and rituals in their socio-religious life under the guidance of village priest called as '*Hoja*'. Moreover, the whole Dimasa population is the believer of 12 religious areas or territorial jurisdiction called as '*Daikho*' in which the God and Goddesses reside in that particular '*Daikho*' to protect them and control their destiny (13). The Dimasas propitiate a number of benevolent spirits; they also believe in malevolent or evil spirits who have to be appeased in order to prevent themselves from falling under their wrath of harm (14). The Dimasas had their ancient capitals at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur each of which still bears significant archaeological ruins, proving of the rich architectural and royal grandeur of this group of people (15).

Objectives:

The main objective of the paper is-

- To know about the origin of cowrie shells among the Dimasas.
- To know in detail about the material cultural significance of cowrie shells among the Dimasas.
- To find out, whether cowrie shells have any significant role in their traditional healing practices.

Methodology

The paper is mainly based on primary data. In this regard, field work was conducted from January 2023 to May 2023 in Dhansiri village of Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Further, from January 2024 to July 2024, in the Dishu Raji, Topodisa villages under the Haflong sub division and in the Semkhor village under the Maibang sub division of Dima Hasao district, Assam. The said villages were one of the oldest settlements of the Dimasa Tribal group. The study was done on 579 families, with a total population of 2937. The study was done on all the families, to know about their ideas and knowledge related to their oral traditions as associated with the Cowrie shells. Interviews were taken on the folk performers and traditional healers, who had adequate knowledge and practices of Cowrie shells, as used in their different social ceremonies and cultural practices. As most of the Dimasa oral narratives lack proper documentation, it was necessary to have a face-to-face conversation with the resource persons, who were mostly elderly persons, so that the required data on the pristine myths, legends and folktales could be properly collected.

Findings and Discussion

Myth Related to Cowrie Shells:

It is believed that during the period Mahabharata in the *Dwaparyug* the Dimasa ancestors of this region had to buy land from the *Pandava* brother *Sahadev*, as he was the owner of the entire land. The medium of purchase was against the gold and silver. During that time when *Bhisma* died, his death ritual was conducted by the Dimasa ancestors after the purchase of a plot of land against gold and silver. They felt that, in this way upto the arrival of *Kali*

yug there would be noted shortage of gold and silver. Thus, they kept the ritual of buying the land with Cowrie shell instead gold and silver.

Significance of Cowrie Shells

- 1) Symbolic meaning of the Cowrie shell:** The Dimasas strongly believed that the Cowrie shells were created by their supreme Deity *Shivrai* or *Kechai Khaiti*. The pointed oval parts of a shell symbolizes the origin and terminal end of the earth span. The small marks on the body of the shell symbolizes the different *yugas* or time span of the earth. The hollow mark in between the shell, symbolizes the smooth passage different natural resources like air, water, light through the shell, which are the prime natural resource of human survival on the earth. Such resources are essential both for their body, for their cattle wealth as well as for their food through agriculture.
- 2) Cowrie shell as bead:** Cowrie shell '*Khauthi*' is a marine object with a size of 1 cm. Among the Dimasas, '*Khauthi*' is valued as a very precious object and belief to be God of ocean or sea. It has a deep significance as beads especially for babies and are used to make amulet named as, '*Jingsdu*' in which one or three Cowrie shells are strung with black cotton thread along with three circular and one rectangular shaped black colour glass beads (Figure1). It is tied around the waist of a baby in belief as a symbol to eradicate the evil eye or evil spirit '*Sagain Madai*'. According to religious belief among the Dimasas, when the evil eye tried to harm or attack the baby, they return back by looking the Cowrie shell tied around the waist of a baby that there is a Deity of Ocean.



Figure 1: Cowrie shell '*Khauthi*' as amulet '*Jingsdu*'.

3) Cowrie shell in historic trade: Historically different kingdoms of Assam had a long trade relation with Koch kingdom. The Dimasa ancestors had the trade with Koch kingdom directly. Goods were exchanged against the coins by the Koch traders, whereas the Dimasas used to exchange against their Cowrie shells. In the Garo village of Cooch Behar district, some evidences of these shells have been found. The concerned people told that, the shells were available to them since more than one hundred years and even their parents saw those during their childhood days.

4) Importance of Cowrie shell in *Shamanaiba* ritual: Every Dimasa household depends on '*Shamanaiba*' ritual, which is a religious practice performed by a priest known as '*Hoja*'. To perform this religious practice only a male could be a priest, who is known to be sacred. Among the Dimasa, any social problem related to family or community is first of all suggest to perform these ritual '*Shamanaiba*'. Ritual '*Shamanaiba*' is of two types- '*Shamanaiba*' through stem of a plant and another '*Shamanaiba*' through Cowries '*Khauthi*'. The ritual is practiced to foretell any malevolent effect, any health disorder or any problems related to social life. With the prediction of

the problem, the priest '*Hoja*' also suggest the solution which might be any rituals including sacrifices or offering prayer to '*Sibrae*' to eradicate the problems. The ritual '*Shamanaiba*' through '*Khauthi*' is performed by the priest '*Hoja*' early in the morning in an empty stomach facing towards the direction of sunrise. Most of the rituals among the Dimasa community are foretold by the priest '*Hoja*' through ritual '*Shamanaiba*'. The material needed to perform '*Shamanaiba*' ritual is sacred machete called as '*Sheng*', 4 cowrie shells '*Khauthi*', basil leaf or '*Tulsi*' to sprinkle the holly water.

To perform the '*Shamanaiba*' ritual, at first the place where the ritual needs to be selected and to be demarcated with an imaginary line (Figure 2). Then the selected place is made sacred through the sprinkling of holly water with basil leaf '*Tulsi*' around that imaginary line. Then the sacred Machete is erected in the middle towards the sun rises in which the 4 cowries are repeatedly thrown in that sacred place through uttering prayer by the priest '*Hoja*' with in that imaginary line and to foretell or predict the problem of the person (Figure 3). The priest '*Hoja*' with his divine power offer prayer to the Deity '*Sibrae*' and use to predict the problems accordingly.



Figure 2: Male Priest performing '*Shamanaiba*' ritual.



Figure 3: Different varieties of Cowrie shells 'Khauthi'.

For example, if a baby or child is not healthy and suffering from fever for days, even after medical consultation, then the family members prefer to consult with their village priest to see the cause of the problem through '*Shamanaiba*' ritual. According to his detected problem, adequate solution is being suggested by the priest. Further, among the Dimasas, if their familial relations, often becomes quarrelsome with each other, then they use to depend on '*Shamanaiba*' ritual to find out the possible cause and adequate solution. If a person has lost their property like animals, fowl, jewelry, cloth etc. then they prefer to consult with the priest and they use to find out the lost valuable through this ritual only.

Further, the '*Pharakhoba*' ritual is the outcome of '*Shamanaiba*' ritual. In astrological term if the one of the planet or '*Naksatra*' is not in a good position, then the person might face a failure in success. To overcome these obstacles, the '*Pharakhoba*' ritual is organized by the victim to overcome the problem and to regain success in life. In this ritual the cowrie shells plays a symbolic behaviour as a medium of exchange. This ritual is of three types- Pharamashni (7 cowries), Pharamasugu (9 cowries), Pharamajra (15 cowries). It is belief among Dimasa that the bad fortune of a person is exchange with a cowrie shells to the God of Planet '*Naksatra*' in order to return the good fortune back to their body. Here, the Cowries symbolizes precious object of God of Ocean as a medium of exchange.

5) Use of Cowrie shell in the name giving ceremonies of a child: Among the Dimasas, children use to get their surname from their father and clan is transmitted to them from their mother. In a Dimasa family, after 3 to 4 months of birth, the name giving ceremony of a child use to get conducted. During the process of name giving ceremony, the day of birth is specially

taken into consideration. If a child is born on the odd day of the week that is on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Sunday then one Cowrie shell used to be placed on the plantain leaf and kept in front of the child during the ritual related to the name giving ceremony. On the other hand, if a child is born on the even day of the week that is on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday then two Cowrie shell used to be placed on the plantain leaf and kept in front of the child during the ritual related to the name giving ceremony. After the performance of the name giving rituals, the traditional Dimasa priest or Hojause to tie up those number of Cowrie shells into the waist of their children with a black thread. It is believed that such Cowrie shells will keep the child protected from the adverse effects of different evil spirits and evil agents. This is used to remain tied upto 5 or 7 years of their age compulsorily.

- 6) Use of Cowrie shell in the marital rituals:** In the marital ritual of the Dimasas, the use of Cowrie shells are immensely important. As per the odd and even day of birth in the week, specific number of Cowrie shells are tied up with a yellow or red thread for both the bride and the groom. For example, if the bride or groom is born on Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Sunday then one Cowrie shell is to tied up. Again, if the bride or groom is born on Tuesday, Thursday or Saturday then two Cowrie shells are to be tied up. The tied-up Cowrie shells are to be kept individually by the bride and groom during their entire ritual process of the marriage. It symbolizes the blessings of their supreme Deities for a happy and prosperous married life.
- 7) Significance of Cowrie shell in oath and ordeal:** In the traditional political organization of the Dimasas, the Cowrie

shell is immensely important. They have their own method to select their traditional village headman, which is now also known as Sarkari Gaon Bura. Although he has to follow the administrative guidelines of modern political organization in a number of cases (particularly on financial matters), still in a number of cases they use to follow their age old traditional customary judiciary. Once the headman is selected by the villagers, he has to take an oath and ordeal related to assurance of village protection and ensurance of justice to each and every villager. The oath is taken in the presence of their traditional priest Hoja, with a piece of plantain leaf, a bottle of their traditional country liquor Judima and a pair of Cowrie shell. Similarly, during the process of trial both the victim and offender are supposed to take the oath with plantain leaf and a Cowrie shell to state the exact matter of fact, without any sort of lie or distortion of facts, failing which they will be punished by their supreme Deity or may face allied misfortunes.

8) Significance in the selling and purchase of land: This is applicable in between the two Dimasa people only. In such cases, if a Dimasa people is interested to sell his land to another Dimasa people, then the person who is going to purchase supposed to gift a pair of Cowrie shell to the seller. Meanwhile, if the land is going to get mortgaged by the actual owner for a certain time period to another person, then the buyer will only give the money to the first person. In such cases the gift of Cowrie shell is not conducted from the side of the first person. Symbolically it has a meaning. As the Cowrie shell is culturally very significant among the studied people, so this is offering of Cowrie shell as a gift means that, for the buyer the seller is person with a graceful dignity. Meanwhile, this practice is getting much reduced in the township areas; however, in the Dhansiri and Semkhor village, this practice is well noticed.

9) Demarcation of village boundary: It is to be mentioned here that, in the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts, the Dimasas are dwelling with several other Tribal groups like the Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Rengma Nagas, Hmars, Garos. On the other hand, the Dhansiri area of Karbi Anglong is noted as a hinterland with Nagaland. Often there used to be certain undocumented territorial issues in between them. To demarcate their village or territorial boundary, in the first and last homestead it is compulsory to keep a pair of Cowrie shell, as a symbol of their cultural uniqueness or ethnic identity.

Concluding remarks

Cowrie shells are inseparable in the socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-political life of the studied Dimasa people. From the historical evidence it is clear that the Cowrie shells were traded since time immemorial. This material cultural object is an integral part of their oral tradition and oral healing. The concerned people

are very much psychologically depended on their traditional healers and traditional priests. They strongly believe that, to maintain social discipline, familial peace, for good health, oral traditional practices are the only way, as it is blessed by their different Deities and ancestral spirits. It has been found that, the studied Dimasa people feel very prestigious in practising their cultural traditions and oral traditions. Among the concerned Dimasa people including the young generations, it is strongly believed that, only by adhering to own cultural practices and age-old oral traditions, they can keep their ethnic identity unique and specific from the other ethnic groups dwelling in their surroundings.

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Declaration

There is no conflict of interest with anyone in this paper.

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