

COSTUMES OF KARBI TRIBE IN ASSAM

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Abstract: Assam one of the states of the north eastern region of India, is considered as miniature India for its composite nature of culture and peculiar population structure, consisting of the representation of some major groups like the Aryans, Dravadians, Austrics and the Tibeto-Burmans. Moreover most of the tribes and the sub-tribes of these groups maintain their own costumes, traditions and the language.). Costume is an important adjunct of one's personality,. The first impression as well as racial self expression of an individual depend upon his/her physical appearance which largely rest on the costume and at the same time is an excellent embodiment of their sense of beauty. Costume refers to the style of dress including accessories and hairdos especially that, particular to a nation, social class or historical period. It is a cultural visual, a mirror of time and the people. Whatever be its origin, costume provides the visible index of the homogeneity and the unity of the people or their absence. In most civilization costume connotes something more than mere clothing. Very often it expresses some of the structure and the aspirations of a society. Costume has been functioning as a fashion of personality and has tended to the cultivated as an old art. Therefore, the present investigation was an attempt to study the traditional costumes with special reference to the Karbi tribe in the background of their socio-cultural practices

Key words : costume , Karbi, socio- cultural

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Introduction

Costume in the broadest sense of the term refers to all the various arts and devices invented by means of covering; mutilation or by paints (Dar, 1969). Costume is an important adjunct of one's personality,. The first impression as well as racial self expression of an individual depend upon his/her physical appearance which largely rest on the costume and at the same time is an excellent embodiment of their sense of beauty. Costume refers to the style of dress including accessories and hairdos especially that, particular to a nation, social class or historical period. It is a cultural visual, a mirror of time and the people. Whatever be its origin, costume provides the visible index of the homogeneity and the unity of the people or their absence. In most civilization costume connotes something more than mere clothing. Very often it expresses some of the structure and the aspirations of a society. Costume has been functioning as a fashion of personality and has tended to the cultivated as an old art. In the modern accidental civilization, it has grown into something more than a mere accessory designed to set off physical beauty. Thus, costume means dresses, ornaments, hair arrangements, foot wear, mutilations and allied items of personal beautification which also dearly manifest and exhibit the tradition, customs, belief and social set up of any group.

Costume, whatever might be the origin, serves a symbol of the role and the status of the individual in the society and it obtains for the wearer the rewards of recognition, approval and identification. Costumes must also be obvious to anyone interested in humanity and is also a marked characteristic of any culture (Fabri, 1960).

India is a vast country with variation in costumes and the Indian costumes have taken their own shape and form according to the climate, religion, product of industry, economic factors, social and political changes and also the vicissitudes of its long history (Flynn, 1985). Assam one of the

states of the north eastern region of India, is considered as miniature India for its composite nature of culture and peculiar population structure, consisting of the representation of some major groups like the Aryans, Dravadians, Austrics and the Tibeto-Burmans. Moreover most of the tribes and the sub-tribes of these groups maintain their own costumes, traditions and the language.

Tribal society, though quite different from the rest, has been an integral part of the assamese society since the time immemorial. Costume of a community or a nation are an essential aspect of its cultural heritage. The tribal costume bring up a life some picture of the tribe (Biswas, 1985).

The Karbis, the major tribal ethnic group of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam have their own traditional dresses, ornaments, dances, music and folk songs. The cloth they wear are home made from the locally grown cotton or the eri silk. Even though agriculture is the primary occupation, handloom industry is very much common to all the Karbi families. Rearing of the eri silk worm, spinning and weaving are not only the common practices among them, but these are inseparable parts of their culture. Therefore a woman are without the knowledge of spinning and weaving is unthinkable in the Karbi society. The Karbi people can be easily recognized by their traditional dresses and the ornaments which are artistically designed and inherited from their forefathers. The Karbi costumes more or less are similar to those of the Khasis (Das, 1972).

However, the fashion fever has widely influenced the traditional dress (*Asomiya Biwsakosh*, 1987). Besides, invasion by outsiders, migrations of the people from one place to another the development of modern communication, urbanization and the advent of industrialization are some of the causes for change of the present-day costumes. Apart from this education, social economical, political and psychological changes have also brought about a change in the traditional costumes. Likewise many changes have taken place in the traditional costumes of the Karbi tribe also. Now-a-days, the younger generations have adopted western as well as new styled dresses and ornaments. Christianity is also another factor, which has play an important role in modifying the Karbi life0style including their costumes.

In view of the important position occupied by the tribal textiles in the textile tradition of Assam, as a whole, study of costumes of all such ethnic groups need to be documented systematically. Therefore, the present investigation was an attempt to study the traditional costumes with special reference to the Karbi tribe in the background of their socio-cultural practices, with the following objectives :

1. To study the cultural practices in relation to the costumes.
2. To study about the costumes used in different occasions.

The North-eastern Region of India enjoys a place of pride in the whole of the country for its immensely rich assembly of tribal cultures. Adjoining Nagaland, North of North Cachar Hills, South of Nagaon and South and West Golaghat district, there is a hill district of Assam known today as Karbi Anglong (formerly known as Mikir hill district). For the study of Karbi Anglong district of Assam, having highest number of the Karbi population, was selected for the investigation.

The data were collected through personal interview method as it was found to be most convenient for the type of the study undertaken. Based on the objectives, an interview hair style and foot wears of men, women and children.

Cultural practices and their costumes

Marriage ceremony : The traditional decorative costumes are used by the Karbi brides like *pini* (*mekhela*), *pekok* (*chadar*) and *wamkok* (waist girdle) with blouse. For marriage they wear *cheleng-pekok* and another *pekok* is used (which may be either *cheleng-pekok* and another *pekok*) to cover the head. Originally the bride used costumes of cotton materials but now-a days they use different synthetic and silk materials for their dresses.

All kinds of ornaments like *najansai* (earrings), *roy* (bracelet), *Lek* (necklace) and *aman* (finger ring) made of gold or silver are worn by them. Now-a-days they wear different new styled ornaments in place of traditional ones, specially the big pair of silver earrings called *Kadeng chinro*.

As a traditional costume, Karbi bride-groom wears the *ricong* (loin cloth), *Choihongthor* (sleeveless jacket) and turban (*poho*). During marriage, they wear the white coloured *poho* called *poho-ke-lok*. Now-a-days they use *cheleng pekok* as dhoti in place of the traditional *rickong*.

Originally the Karbi bridegroom wears the traditional ornaments like *Lang abou* (red colour Bread necklace), *Kardhuni* (waist belt made of silver) and different designed *arnans* (finger rings).

Death ceremony : The funeral is the most elaborate, costly and important of all the ceremonies performed by the Karbis. The death ceremony is observed by *chomangkan* which literally means a Khasi-dance. There is no fixed time and date of performing *Chomangkan*. The young boys and girls (generally from outside their village) dance by taking *chong-nok* (traditional drum) in their hands. The dance and songs consist of *nimso-kerung*, *banjar-keken* and *chong-chingnag*, *kengtir kekan* and *risomar*.

During the performance of these dances the young boys wear their traditional *rickong*, *choi*, *poho*. The girls also wear their traditional *pini*, *pekok*, *wamkok* and blouse. During performance of these dances the girls use a black coloured cloth or scarf called *jir-ik* to cover their head.

Costumes of the dead : New clothes given to the dead body before taking to the burial ground. According to the status of the person the dead body is made to wear the clothes. Then a wide bed sheet called *Pelu* is laid below the dead body and another piece is laid over it. At a pin pointing pinnacle and ornaments of the head of the dead body is used a piece of cloth or hanky or *gamocha* or *pekok* of which four corners are tied as knot by using 9 nos. of threads. This process known as *mekbar bandha* as it is believed by the Karbi people that if this is not done, the eyes of the dead body will be still in their next birth (Teronpi, 1994).

Festivals : Among the festivals observed by the Karbis, the important ones are the *rongker* and *hacha*. *Rongker* is a socio-religious one and the other is a socio one.

There are different types of *rongker*, one is performed at the beginning of the new year by propitiating the different Gods and Goddesses for the well-being of the entire village. The other is performed at the beginning of every 5 years; and is called *Wofong rongker*. They perform the

other festival *hacha* after the harvest. Community eating singing and dancing are the most striking features of these festivals as the Karbis are great lovers of dance and music.

During the performance of the dances, the boys and girls wear their traditional dresses. The boys wear rickong, *choihongthar* and turban (poho). They also wear bead necklaces and sometimes earrings made of bamboos. The feathers of the long tail of the *bhimraj* bird, azure blue in colour is prized as the most valuable decoration for the turban of young boys on festive occasions.

The girls also wear their traditional *pini*, *pekok wamkok* with blouse. They also use *jir-ik* to cover their heads while performing dances.

Conclusion

The traditional and ornaments of the Karbis are perishing because of the changing tastes and linking of the younger generation with time, hard economic conditions and struggles for the day to day existence. This is influenced by the easy communication, increasing contacts with outside world and mass media.

It is understood that the traditional costumes of the Karbi community need to be preserved for future reference as the community could easily be recognized through their highly artistic and impressive traditional costumes and cultures.

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