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The Cultural and Utilitarian Significance of Bamboo Varieties in the Borok Society of Tripura

Risha Debbarma

MA, Dept of Kokborok, Tripura University, India

Abstract-- This study explores the intrinsic relationship between the indigenous Borok (Tripuri) community and bamboo, a resource deeply woven into their socio-cultural and economic fabric. Known as "green gold" in the region, bamboo is not merely a forest product but a vessel for traditional ancestral knowledge (elem). The study documents the diverse varieties found in Tripura such as Wathwi, Wandal, Wasul, and Wamilikand examines their specific roles in human life-cycle rituals, from birth to religious worship. The main goal is to sort bamboo crafts into groups based on their structural parts: bamboo splits (waruk), strips (warechek), and fine wicker (engsa). By analyzing items such as the Bailing (rice winnowing fan), Kisip (fan), and Japa (casket), the research highlights how specific mechanical properties of different bamboo species dictate their use in daily household tasks. However, the study examines the intergenerational transmission of skills, where craftsmanship is passed from father to son, ensuring the survival of indigenous technology.

Keywords-- Borok (Tripuri), Kokborok, Bamboo Varieties, Traditional Knowledge (Elem), Ethnobotany, Tripura Handicrafts, Sustainable Materials.

I. INTRODUCTION

The state of Tripura, nestled in the lush landscapes of Northeast India, is home to a profound cultural heritage where nature and human life exist in a symbiotic relationship. At the heart of this connection lies bamboo, a versatile resource that the indigenous Borok (Tripuri) community has utilized for millennia. Far more than a mere plant, bamboo is a cornerstone of the state's identity, earning its reputation as a vital socio-economic pillar. In the Kokborok language, the diverse varieties ranging from Wathwi to Kantaborok—reflect a sophisticated traditional botanical classification system that has sustained the local population for generations.

For the Borok people, bamboo is an omnipresent companion throughout the journey of life. Its significance begins at birth, where it is used in traditional rituals, and extends to the spiritual realm, where bamboo structures (wathop) serve as sacred altars for deity worship. This deep-rooted cultural bond is supported by an intricate body of ancestral knowledge known as elem.

This knowledge is not found in textbooks but is passed down through a living oral and practical tradition, transitioning from father to son and grandfather to grandson, ensuring that the art of bamboo craftsmanship remains a resilient part of the communities.

The technical mastery of the Borok community is best observed in their ability to manipulate bamboo into various forms. By categorizing the plant into waruk (splits), warechek (strips), and engsa (wicker), they have developed a specialized inventory of tools and household items. From the bailing used in the fields to the Japa kept in the home, these artifacts represent a perfect blend of utilitarian function and artistic expression. As the world moves toward sustainable living, the traditional bamboo practices of Tripura offer a blueprint for eco-friendly innovation.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To identify and categorize the specific varieties of bamboo found in Tripura (such as Wathwi, Wandal, and Wasul).

III. METHODOLOGY

Primary data gathering from the field using the stratified random sampling method.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Borok bamboo craftsmanship falls under the domain of folklore (Lukusimung). While several scholars have touched upon the material culture of Tripura, a comprehensive study focusing specifically on the intricate world of bamboo (*Wamung*) has been largely absent.

1. *Naresh Chandra Debbarma (2010)*: In his work '*Tripura Adibasi*,' he documents the lifestyle of the Tiplasa people and lists approximately 32 bamboo artifacts, including the *Khuturuk*, *Japa*, and *Langa*. He rightly asserts that bamboo and cane are indispensable to the Tripuri household. However, while he lists the items, the technical process and the diverse weaving patterns (*Raida*) are not detailed.

2. *Shyamlal Debbarma (1983):* In 'Sadaran Somikha AlukarUchoi' (published by TRI), the author focuses on the Uchoi community. He mentions essential items like the *Chempai*, *Bailing*, and *Yampwra*. While valuable, the scope is limited to one sub-tribe and does not provide a holistic view of the entire Borok dophani (community) bamboo heritage.
3. *Binoy Debbarma:* In his 'English-Kokborok-Bengali Dictionary,' he provides the terminology for bamboo tools used in traditional weaving (the *thanti*). While his 'Kokborok-English Dictionary' is a vital linguistic resource, it lacks an in-depth technical analysis of how different bamboo varieties are specifically applied to different manufacturing processes.
4. *Subimal Roy (2002):* In 'Tripurar Bansh o Beter Karusilpa,' Roy attempts to categorize the bamboo and cane crafts of Tripura. However, this work suffers from significant **linguistic inaccuracies**. For example, the traditional flute *Sumui* is incorrectly spelled as "Sumu." Such errors in Kokborok terminology can lead to a loss of indigenous identity and cultural distortion.

V. DISCUSSION

1. Classification of Bamboo Products

The use of bamboo is a unique ancestral knowledge (*elem*) inherent to the Borok (Tripuri) community. Since the beginning of creation, this skill has been passed down through generations; children learn it from their fathers, and fathers learn it from their grandfathers, preserving this heritage continuously. In their daily household lives, the Borok people use various items crafted from bamboo splits (*waruk*), bamboo strips (*warechek*), and bamboo wicker (*engsa*).

Items made with Bamboo Splits (Waruk):

- **Bailing** (rice winnowing fan)
- **Yakhung** (Storage)
- **Kisip** (hand fan)
- **Jangini Takhuk** (Sieve/Filter)

Items made with Bamboo Strips (Warechek):

- **Choka** (large basket for storage or transport)
- **Bera** (bamboo matting/fencing)

Items made with Fine Wicker (Engsa):

- **Yanji** (small container/basket)
- **Japa** (traditional storage casket)
- **Garingni Char** (components used for carts/structures)

Items made with a mix of wicker and bamboo poles:

- **Bana** (traditional mat or partition)

2. Categorization of Bamboo Products

The Borok community creates a vast array of items, from large structures to tiny tools, to meet the needs of daily life. These products are broadly classified into three functional categories based on their use:

1. **Household Items** (*Noknisamungnothepajakmani*)
2. **Agricultural/Work Tools** (*Habanisamungothepajakmani*)
3. **Miscellaneous Items** (*Kubunsamungothepajakmani*)

3. Household Functional Items

These are essential hand-crafted bamboo tools used within the home for cooking, storage, and comfort:

1. **Bailing:** rice winnowing fan (*mairumchoknani*).
2. **Dula:** A hanging or standing basket used to store miscellaneous household goods safely.
3. **Chekhok:** A specialized strainer or vessel used specifically for preparing **Chakhwi** (a traditional Tripuri alkaline dish).
4. **Dol:** A large storage container used for keeping paddy or grains.
5. **Dhalak:** A flat tray or shallow basket used for sorting and displaying items.
6. **Hatwirai:** Small storage racks or baskets kept near the hearth (*nokganti*) for salt and spices.
7. **Khuturuk:** A sturdy storage basket used for keeping traditional risa and rignai clothing and other valuables.
8. **Jangini:** A sieve or mesh tool used for filtering and drying food items.
9. **Japa:** A traditional decorative casket or box used for storage.
10. **Kariya:** A medium-sized container used for storing paddy or rice.
11. **Kharpa:** A specialized basket used for washing and draining rice before cooking.
12. **Kisip:** A traditional hand fan used for cooling during the hot summer months.
13. **Takhuk:** A bamboo coop used for keeping poultry (chickens).
14. **Phuta:** A small, delicate container used for storing tiny household knick-knacks.
15. **Pura:** A winnowing tray used for cleaning and separating husks from rice.

16. **Twisting:** A specialized carrying tool or small basket used when fetching water.
17. **Waying:** A traditional bamboo cradle used for putting infants to sleep.
18. **Tukiri:** A common basket used for carrying or collecting various items.
19. **Yamphwra:** A low bamboo stool or mat used for sitting

4. *Agricultural and Field Tools (Habani, samungo, thepajakmani)*

The Borok people are deeply connected to **Huk** (Jhum/shifting cultivation). These tools are engineered for durability to withstand the rigors of field labour:

1. **Langma:** A large carrying basket used to transport essential supplies and harvested crops to and from the fields.
2. **Kasleng:** A specialized basket used specifically for carrying seeds and saplings during the sowing season.
3. **Dingwra:** A heavy-duty transport basket used to carry the harvested produce from the hillside fields back to the village granaries.
4. **Nokhai:** A medium-sized basket used for collecting and gathering forest produce or wild vegetables (*mwikhwithwngrok*).
5. **Chempai:** A small, handy basket used by farmers to carry vegetable seeds or small cuttings while planting.

5. *Miscellaneous and Specialized Items (Kubunsamungothepajakmani)*

Beyond the home and field, bamboo serves unique purposes in fishing, weaving, and personal care:

1. **Betwra:** A traditional bamboo comb used for grooming hair and personal adornment.
2. **ChamriMaipol:** A ceremonial bamboo item presented as a gift or token during wedding rituals (specifically for the *Chamari Kwtal*, or new son-in-law).
3. **Choka:** A large, specialized trap or basket used for catching fish in rivers and streams.
4. **Sobam:** A critical component of the traditional backstrap loom; it is used to hold and tension the thread while weaving *Risa* and *Rignai*.
5. **Eachi:** A bamboo scoop or small trap used to catch fish in shallow water or during the draining of ponds.

6. **Wakhok:** A sturdy bamboo enclosure or coop used for keeping pigs.
7. **Sudam:** A bridge or structural support built over small streams (*Twisa*) to facilitate travel.
8. **Siching:** An intricate bamboo fishing trap designed to catch fish automatically in flowing water.
9. **Sopi:** A traditional bamboo rain shield or hat worn on the head to protect against sun and rain during outdoor labour.
10. **Maitang:** A decorative or ornamental bamboo craft used for aesthetic purposes and home beautification.

6. *The Role of Bamboo in Borok Social Identity*

In our state of Tripura, the government recognizes that the bamboo crafts produced by the Borok (Tripuri) community serve as a major symbol of their identity. Through bamboo, the unique ancestral knowledge (*elem*) of the Borok people is expressed across various fields. Bamboo is an absolute necessity in the life of the Borok; without it, their traditional way of existence is unimaginable.

From the moment bamboo shoots (*muya*) sprout, they are consumed as a staple food, and throughout their growth, the plants are integrated into every stage of life. As mentioned previously, from the moment a child is born and the umbilical cord is severed with a bamboo sliver until the very end of life, bamboo is used in diverse rituals and daily tasks.

Bamboo is as essential to a Borok person's survival as food itself. Every morning begins with bamboo: from cooking rice in bamboo tubes (*Wasung*) to using bamboo containers for household needs and using the *Kisip* (hand fan) for a breeze. Even at night, the *Yakhung* and other bamboo structures provide the foundation for rest. It is estimated that there are more than 230 types of bamboo artifacts used by the Borok community in their daily lives. Thus, it can be said that the very journey of the Borok people's life is supported entirely by bamboo.

7. *Weaving Patterns and Varieties of Designs*

To make bamboo artifacts beautiful and durable, the Borok people have developed various weaving pattern (*Raida*). While the material remains bamboo, the aesthetic and structural integrity changes based on the pattern chosen. In addition to bamboo, specific vines and reeds (*Rai*), like *Teketiya* or *Chir Kosong*, are used to bind and finish the products.

Thirteen Traditional Weaving pattern (Raida)

Your research identifies 13 distinct patterns observed in Tripuri craftsmanship:

1. **Waborok Raida:** The basic/standard weave.
2. **Takhumtwi Raida:** "Tortoise-water" or shell-like pattern.
3. **Rai Swlai Raida:** Interchanged vine pattern.
4. **Mayung Mokol:** "Elephant Eye" pattern (a very famous and sturdy hexagonal weave).
5. **Tokhuruma Raida:** Dove-inspired pattern.
6. **Sillaimu Raida:** Meaning "bullet" or "pointed" pattern.
7. **Khotamkhe Raida:** A knot-style weave.
8. **Mwkhuk Bailing Raida:** A pattern mimicking a specific basket style.
9. **SinjoYapai Raida:** "Lion's Paw" pattern.
10. **Champa Kampa Raida:** Flower-inspired pattern.
11. **WaKosong Raida:** Vertical/straight bamboo pattern.
12. **Tokolok Raida:** "Chicken cage" or mesh pattern.
13. **Aiphari Raida:** A specialized border or finishing weave.

8. Process of Manufacture (Process of Manufacturing)

The creation of these items follows a disciplined three-step traditional process:

1. **Extraction:** Traveling to the forest (*Bolong*) to select and cut the specific maturity of bamboo and vines (*Rai*).
2. **Preparation:** Hand-splitting and sizing the bamboo (*Yakbaiwajago*) into strips or wicker according to the intended item.
3. **Completion & Curing:** After weaving, the finished item is either placed over the hearth (*Hokao tonijago*) for smoke-curing to prevent insect attacks or put into immediate use.

9. Seven Methods of Weaving

While there are 13 patterns, they are executed using 7 distinct methods of interlacing. Some items require a specific method and cannot be made with any other, showing the precision of Tripuri ancestral knowledge.

VI. FINDINGS

1. **Deep Ethnobotanical Knowledge:** The Borok people categorize bamboo into at least 13 specific varieties (like *Wathwi* and *Wandal*), each chosen for its unique strength and flexibility to suit different tasks.
2. **Vast Material Taxonomy:** There are over 230 unique bamboo artifacts used in Borok life, ranging from household items like the *Bailing* to specialized fishing traps like the *Siching* and agricultural tools like the *Langma*.
3. **Sophisticated Engineering (Raida):** The community utilizes 13 distinct weaving patterns (such as the *MayungMokol* or "Elephant Eye") and 7 manufacturing methods, proving that their craftsmanship is a blend of mathematical precision and artistic heritage.
4. **Cradle-to-Grave Integration:** Bamboo is an inseparable part of the Borok identity, serving as a lifeline from birth to death, it is used for everything from cutting the umbilical cord to building deity altars (*Wathop*) and daily cooking.

VII. CONCLUSION

Watei Wamungni dal (Bamboo and Its Varieties) confirms that bamboo is the foundational pillar of the Borok (Tripuri) community's cultural and material existence. It is not merely a natural resource but a "living heritage" that defines the identity of the state. Through the documentation of over 230 bamboo artifacts and the 13 intricate weaving patterns (Raida), it is evident that the Borok people possess a sophisticated indigenous science, or Elem, which has been perfected over centuries. The study shows that the relationship between the Borok people and bamboo is holistic, spanning from the spiritual construction of the Wathop (deity altar) to the practical engineering of the Langma (carrying basket) and Siching (fish trap). This "cradle-to-grave" connection ensures that every stage of human life is supported by sustainable, eco-friendly bamboo technology. Furthermore, the traditional three-step manufacturing process, including the smoke-curing technique, provides a time-tested model for durability that rivals modern synthetic materials. However, as Tripura moves toward a modern industrial economy, the preservation of this traditional ancestral knowledge is critical.



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The findings suggest that by integrating the artistic MayungMokol or Takhumtwi patterns into contemporary products, the Tripura Bamboo Mission can create high-value exports that honour indigenous roots while driving economic growth. Protecting this "Green Gold" and the wisdom of its makers is essential for the cultural and environmental sustainability of Tripura.

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