

CHAPTER-III: Ornamentation which literally means an attractive object that is used to decor any place or material¹ has an important place in a society. An immense variety of ornament has been produced in India throughout the ages, which has created rich heritages. Ornament perceived not just like an element of art system but also as a meta-cultural phenomenon is one of the most ancient and constant forms of communication and mutual enrichment of culture.² North east India is a confluence of people, popularly described as tribes,³ living in different stages of development and in most cases as we discussed in our previous chapter; without a written history of their own, contributes in making the greater Assamese society. Ornament is ubiquitous markers of everyday life and yet frequently ignored, belittled and even contested. Ornament is an outline of a typology of human functions that integrates aesthetic and utilitarian, individual and social role.⁴ The ornamentation of the inhabitant tribe is very rich and colourful. Cultural ornamentation in customs, rituals and ceremonies as well as ornamentation in architecture, sculpture and building interiors are important form of ornamentation.

The total population of Assam in 2011 census is 31,169,272 and of them 6,506,570 persons are tribes⁵. Among the tribes, Bodo represents nearly half of the total tribal population of the state, followed by Mishing, Dimasa and Karbi respectably. Rabha, Lalung, Deori and Sonuwal Kacharies also occupied their place in Assam.

Since ornamentation is not just an element of art but also a meta-physical, cultural phenomenon, it is difficult to arrive at a clinical analysis of ornamentation and its role among the tribes. What will be attempted in the course of this chapter will be weave the story of ornamentation in the tribal's life and culture. Along with the Dimasas, other contemporary tribes like the Bodo, Mishing and Karbi's of Assam are rich in ornamentation which is visible in the organization of clan system, marriage system and birth and death.

¹ Catherine Mc Dermott, *Design: The key Concepts*, London/ Newyork,2007,p-174

² N.Nikolenko, *Ornament as a Symbol of Intercultural Communication*, Middle East Journal of Scientific Research ,ISSN 1990-9233,IDOSI Publication,2013.p-444

³ Edward Tuite Dalton, C.S.I, *Tribal History Of Eastern India*, Delhi-6, 1973

⁴ Vlad Glaveanu, *The function of ornaments: A cultural psychological exploration*, Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University,

⁵ *Census report of 2011*



Figure 25: Photograph showing Bodo girls performing traditional dance

The Bodos constitute an important element of the population of Assam and are known for their enchanting cultural peculiarities. About the origin of the Bodo-Kacharis S. Endle says, “The origin of the kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. Here Bodo is derived from ‘*Bod*’ which means Tibet and Kachar means area near the river.⁶ The term ‘*Bodo*’ is used to denote a large group of people who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman speeches of the North and East Bengal, Assam and Burma⁷ and the generic name Bodo was first applied by Hodgson.⁸ They are now largely concentrated in Kokrajhar District, Kamrup and Darrang district. They have their own language and literature; their own religious beliefs; their own customs and traditions; songs and dances as well as fairs and festivals. The Bodos are patriarchal and prefer living in joint family. Father is the head of the family and after his death; the eldest son becomes the head of the family. However in the present day joint family system is prevalent in the rural areas only. Bodo and Dimasa Kachari came from the same Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group of Tibeto-Barman language family⁹ though their social ornamentation is not similar. Bodos from their clan we can understand their hold over land not as sovereign authority or as a ruler but as a master of the land. As we never come across any political establishment of the Bodos in pre-colonial history. The clans are named after their profession which indicates the social system of the Bodos. A

⁶ E.Gait, Op.cit,p-6

⁷ K.Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos*, Calcutta,1992,p-1

⁸K.Brahma, *Ibid*,p-3

⁹K.Brahma, *Ibid*.pp-125,128

clan name ends with the word 'ari'. There is no clan for female in the Bodo society. There are about twenty four male clans. Among them the followers of 'Brahma' cult use *Brahma* surname.¹⁰ *Basumatari* clan is entrusted with the responsibility of solving the land problems, *Swargiari* are the worshipper, *Narzari* clan is entrusted to dry leaves of the jute plant, which is a favorite food as well as essential item in the Bodo cremation, *Gayari* clan is to plant the areca nuts, *Owari* clan is related to the bamboo works and altogether there are twenty four such clan named after their profession.¹¹ Bodos however seems to be the land holders or zaminders and they have their own division of labour. They again come out as a cultivator and a section as a worshiper of 'Brahma' in the line of Hindu system of worship. Masculinity is prominent in the Bodo society. No female clan was exists, again 'Father' as the head of the family occupied superior position and after the death of father, as mentioned not the mother but the eldest son occupied fathers position.



Figure 26: Photograph showing Mishing women performing traditional dance

Next to the Bodos, the Mishing are the largest Scheduled Tribe in the State of Assam.¹² In Assam their habitat is mainly confined in the district of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and in some areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The Mishing were known to the outside world earlier as *Miri*, also have their language and literature.¹³ The language used by the Mishing people is known as "*Mishing language*". It is found that the Mishing are divided

¹⁰ K.Brahma, *Ibid*, p-126

¹¹ K.Brahma, *Ibid*, p-44

¹² Census Report of 2011

¹³ Dr.Shukhdeba Sharma, *Mishing*, New Delhi, 2006.p-504

into two exclusive sections which are known as *Barogum* and *Dahgum*. According to an oral account the tribe had migrated to the plains in two different groups, one under twelve chieftains and the other under ten chieftains. Accordingly they were called *Barogum* and *Dahgum*.¹⁴ Another source gives the sub-divisions of the tribes into three gotras. They are named as *Sobo (Doley)*, *Kander (Pegu)* and *Bomi (Mili)*. These three gotras again sub-divided into *khels*.¹⁵ It is said that different groups were migrated at different times and they frequently changed their dwelling places in the plains. Hence they are named after the name of the place. As the Mishing who came down through the *Chutia* kingdom of *Sodia* were known as *Sodial Miri* or *Chutia Miri*.¹⁶ Clan system among the *Mishing* is a classification of brotherhood, which is a special feature of *Mishing* tribe. Generally the name of the forefather or an imaginary deity is accepted as clan. The boys inherit the father's clan whereas the daughter accepted her husband's clan after marriage. The classification of brotherhood was made primarily for martial reasons. Clans belong to *Pegu* brotherhoods are not to marry within the clans. The same rule is applicable to *Mili* and *Doley* brotherhood.¹⁷ The *Mishing* feel that so long as the Sun and the Moon are there, marriage within the same clan will not be allowed.¹⁸ The clan system of the *Mishing* has a great significance in their social life. Death rituals are performed by the members of the clans of the deceased person only. Nobody is allowed to change his clan and such person loses the right to his father's property. It is also informed that if a child is born in the house of the other clan except his own, the child has to be purified socially. Inter-cast marriage in *Mishing* society is not encouraged. However a non-*Mishing* can enter into a *Mishing* clan through certain ritual of purification on the other hand if a *Mishing* girl marries a man whose clan is unidentified, both of them are excommunicated from the *Mishing* society.¹⁹

¹⁴ A, Sarma, *Folk culture of The Mishing of Assam*, New Delhi, 2004, p-12

¹⁵ T.C, Pamegum, *Miri ba Mishing*, Guwahati, pp-40-41

¹⁶ L. Devi, *Op.cit*, p-157

¹⁷ Tikonjit tay, *The Mishing Tribe of North East India*, 2012, p-1

¹⁸ J.Das, *Folklore of Assam*, New Delhi, 1972, p-71

¹⁹ Information gathered by an interview taken with *Sitaram Bori*, Principal, Dhemaji Junior college, dated 12 January, 2016



Figure 27: Photograph showing Karbi girls performing traditional dance

The Karbis, mentioned as the *Mikir* in the constitution Order of the Government of India, are one of the major ethnic groups in North-east India and especially in the hill areas of Assam, a district administered as per the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, having an autonomous district of their own since 17 November 1951.²⁰ Besides Karbi Anglong district, the karbi-inhabited areas include Dima Hasao, Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat and East Khasi Hills districts in Meghalaya. The Karbis have their own identity with their rich tradition and culture. Karbis are patrilineal society and are composed of five major clans or *kur*. They are *Engti*, *terang*, *Inghi*, *Teron* and *Timung* which are again divided into many sub-clans. *Engti* is divided into five sub-clans, *Terang* is divided into six sub-clans, *Inghi* is divided into thirty sub-clans, *Teron* is divided into six sub-clans and *Timung* is divided into thirty sub-clans.²¹ All clans are exogamous and marriage is possible between persons of different principal clans. Marriage between sub-clans falling under the same principal clan is not allowed. But they can marry any one from any sub-clan belonging to the rest four principal clans. Clan system among the Karbi females was not practiced. Karbi clan system is arranged

²⁰ Information gathered from Karbi Anglong District Council, Diphu, Karbi Anglong.

²¹ Information gathered by an interview with *Tado Terangpi*, Head of the Department of History, Diphu Government College, Diphu, Karbi Anglong.

in rank in the line of administration, to administrate own people not a land. They have their traditional system of governance believed to have been founded in long past.²²



Figure 28: Photograph showing Dimasa dress wear at Traditional dance

The Dimasa majority of population is concentrated in North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, Nogaon district of Assam and Dimapur in the State of Nagaland. They are also scattered in all over the Assam as minority.²³ They do not have written history but the legends are rich. Social customs and rituals are well ornamented. Dimasa are patriarchal and the family is nuclear in character. The Dimasa family consists of husband, wife, unmarried children and unmarried brother and sisters. As soon as the unmarried son or brother marries, they start living separately. This happened in the case of sisters and daughters too. The clan is divided according to traditional work. In the Dimasa society both male and female has clan.²⁴ There are forty male clans which are called as '*Sengphong*' and forty two female clane called as '*julu*' or '*Jaddi*'. From the Dimasa male clan system we can understand the class division or hieratical society. There was a five special male clan; Hasnusa, Haflongsa, Thousensa, Hinguiengsa and Bodosa, for the royal family. From these five clans, one can be a king of Dimasa kingdom. There was also clan for Ministers, Ambassadors, Treasurer, Writers, Smiths, Barber, gardeners and servant.²⁵ The Dimasa society seems more systematic comparing to

²² Dr.Phukan Ch. Phangcho, *The Karbis of North-East India*,Guwahati,2003,p-75

²³ Census Report of 2011

²⁴ Still prevalent among the Dimasas , Also see H.K,Borpujari, *History of the Dimasas*,Guwahati,1997,p-121

²⁵ U.C, Guha, Op.cit,pp-104-105.

contemporary Bodo tribe. As the clan system among the Dimasa the division of works are entrusted. In the Dimasa society though family is patriarchal in character, both male and female enjoyed equal status in the society. However affiliation of 'Ego' which is reckoned to paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother does not apply at equal level. The preference of affiliation, among the Dimasa, is determined by the sex of the 'Ego'. For instance, a male though affiliated to both the clans of paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother, can transmit only the clan of paternal grandfather that is further carried forward by his male issue. Therefore a man carries his matriclan only during his lifetime without being able to pass on to his children as his male child will carry his clan and his girl child will carry her mothers *julu*' or *Jaddi*' However he remains related to the members of his matriclan and cannot marry from the same matriclan. Similarly, a female though inherits both patri and matri clans, can only transmit the matriclan to her children. Even among her children, only the female would carry forward the matri-clan but closely related to the members of patri-clan during lifetime and cannot marry from the same patriclan. Patriclan is primary affiliation of the male members and matri-clan is secondary affiliation, where male members carry forward the patri-clan and the females carry forward the matri-clan by strictly maintaining clan exogamy. On the other hand Dimasa family is unitary in character and the Dimasa women enjoyed satisfactory position. When one of the spouses dies, the widow or the widower will live with her or his unmarried children but never with his or her married son and daughters.²⁶ It is also noticed that a Dimasa married woman never change their surname. Keeping original surname after the marriage is also prevalent among the Karbis.

From the above discussion we find the clan system among the tribes is very significant in their traditional as well as social life. All the concerned tribes of the Northeast region practice the clan system with social value. The clan system regulates the social life of the tribes. Among the Dimasa and Bodos every clan has specific responsibility for work. The Karbi clan system is based on administration and on the other hand Mishing clan system is based on brotherhood. The existence of the double descent among the Dimasas is a very peculiar feature.

²⁶ B.N,Bordoloi, *The Dimasa Kacharis of Assam*, Guwahati,1984.p-38

Social ceremony of marriage is an ancient practice of the human history. Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the two new people, between each and the kin of the other, and establishes the status of the offspring's when they are born. Different community celebrated this function in different way with verity of socio-cultural practices, ornamented with song, dresses, jewelleryes and customs. These were the most versatile element of culture represent the traditional means of artistic expression and a phenomenon that has an undeniable spiritual depth and diversity.²⁷ Ornament as the main method of visualization and artistic reflection of the northeast tribe, in reality was always of paramount importance in understanding the indigenous tribal technology and their communicating subjects in time and space.

The Bodo word for 'Marriage' is '*Haba*'. The word '*ha*' means soil or earth and '*ba*' means to bear something on the back.²⁸ In this connection Sanskrit word for marriage '*bivaha*' also has a similar etymological meaning. Traditionally the Bodos have as many as six types of marriages. These are *Swngnanwi lainai haba*, *Gwrjia lakhinai haba*, *kharrisonai haba*, *Bwnanwi lainai haba*, *Donkhar langni haba* and *Dongkha habnai haba*. Dimasa practiced cross-cousin marriage provided the rules of exogamy of the male and female clans are not violated. Dimasa marriage is called *Jukhaba*. Unlike the Bodos Dimasa do not practice more than one form of marriage system. Marriage by negotiation is the prevailing practice among the Dimasa. However though the Bodo society has various systems of marriages, *Swngnanwi lanai haba* or arranges marriage is most common socially accepted marriage. The marriage among the Karbi's are mainly monogamous in character, yet polygamy is not discarded. Marriage within the same clans is not entertained. The two most popular tools of choosing partner among Karbi's are marriage by negotiation (*adam-achar*) and marriage by selection. Asymmetrical cross-cousin marriage (*orgas-opi-pesokapangri*) is the preferential type of marriage among the Karbi's by which man has to marry his mother's brother's daughter.²⁹ In this type of marriage selection of bride is become easier and family relation

²⁷ N.Nikolenko, *Ornament as a Symbol of Intercultural Communication*, Middle East Journal of Scientific Research ,ISSN 1990-9233,IDOSI Publication,2013,p-453

²⁸ Thomas Pulloppillil & Jacob Aluckal ,*The Bodos: Childeren of Bhullumbutter*, (edited), Guwahati/ Delhi,1997, p-65

²⁹ *The Individual and Social life of Karbi's*, Center for Tai Tribal Studies, 2nd February, Guwahati, 2010.

became closer. For marriage in Bodo, Dimasa and Mishing society bride is selected by parents of the groom. Bodo society is very peculiar in bride's selection, where a group of five members from family relation are formed to make preliminary enquiry about the bride and her family. The member of the bridegroom's party carry a pair of silver bracelets, a pair of silver one rupee coins, a pair of areca nuts, betel leaves and a pair of rice-beer bottles to the house of the bride at the time of settlement. Marriage by negotiation which is a prevailing practice among the Dimasa is ornamented with various rituals. The father and other male relatives of the boy visit the girl's family on a certain fixed date.³⁰ No female relatives or mother of the boy is welcome to the girl's house. The groom's party carries with them a bundle of salt weighing about one kilogram wrapped up in plantain leaves and tied with seven threads. After initial discussion the boy's party offers the bundle to the girl's parents or guardians and if it is accepted it indicates that the parents are ready to establish the proposed matrimonial alliance. The refusal to accept the bundle of salt, on the other hand, indicates that the girl will not be given in marriage to the boy. The custom of offering a bundle of salt is known as '*Sandidangsingba*'.³¹ Carrying of salt in the marriage proposal is practiced by the Dimasas only among the tribes of north east India. The peculiarity of the custom may be because of non-availability of other important items or may be because of salt as a valuable and most essential commodity of the tribe which was prepared by them. In present North Cachar district we found one old village; *Samekhore*, '*same*' means salt in Dimasa and '*khore*' means location or store. Bodos and the contemporary tribes like Mishing used betel-nuts in their rituals may be because of plain duellers' of Assam and betel-nuts are available. The use of seven threads to tie the salt indicates religious beliefs of the Dimasa, as the use of seven layer bamboo in funeral prey is also seen. In the Bodo society, besides the arranged marriage *Gwrjia lakhinai* (where sonless parents adopted son in law for their only daughter) marriage is rather rare, however it does take place. This marriage is celebrated when in a family there are only daughters and there are no son or male members to inherit the family property. Therefore to inherit the family property a man who works in the family is asked to be the bride-groom with his consent. When the boy

³⁰ U.C, Guha, *Op.cit*,p-89

³¹ B.N,Bordoloi, *Op.cit*.p-52

agree to the marriage, he has to leave his parents and relatives, to be more practical the boy must leave some document to say that he does not belong to them anymore. He became officially bride's family and inherits the family property.³² This type of union can be seen among the Karbis called '*Akeman*'³³ where the groom has to give free service to the bride house for a years of two or three, as a bride price and groom have to stay with the bride's family. Here property issues are not given importance. In the Dimasa society the law of inheritance is not based on marriage, rather it is based on clan. The paternal property will be inherited by his nearest male relative if a man does not have any son but daughter can never inherit the paternal property.³⁴ In the Dimasa society the bride's price (*kalti*) is practiced, which is determined by the bride's parents.³⁵ Taking bride's price by the bride's parents is also practiced in the Bodo society.³⁶ But the noticeable point is that the Bodos returned bride price along with the bride if the husband expires suddenly after the marriage.

In the Mishing society, it is after marriage that a Mishing is considered to be a full-fledged member of the tribe. Marriages are held through the age-old customs. There exist two types of marriage system among the Mishing. The formal marriage is called *midang* and the other is called *mogob-dugnem* or *dugalanam*. Child marriage is not prevalent among the Mishings whereas widow re-marriage exists. Cross cousin marriage is not practiced by the tribe. In the formal marriage or *midang* means "taken away man" gave freedom to select their life partner which is called *Kaligosunom*. In such case, an elderly person, generally the father of the boy goes to the parents of the girl or to her nearest relatives and submits a proposal for marriage. Like Karbi tradition in Mishing tradition too, the boy has to work for some days at his father-in-law's house before marriage which is called *mogob-duglum*. Mishing marriage bride price is not popular, the *Apong* (Mishing rice bear) and meat plays an important role in the marriage. In early days a pig or its equivalent 100 or 50 was charged as bride price but is not a compulsory

³² Bhoben Narzari, *Boro-Kacharier Somaj Aro Sancriti*, Guwahati, 1966, p-87

³³ *The Individual and Social life of Karbi's*, Center for Tai Tribal Studies, 2nd February, Guwahati, 2010

³⁴ B.N. Bordoloi, *Op.cit*, p-66

³⁵ S.k. Barpujari, *Op.cit*, p-126

³⁶ Thomas Pulloppillil & Jacob Aluckal, *The BODOS children of Bhullumbutter*, Guwahati/ Delhi, 1997, p-69

custom.³⁷ This event is called *tadpin*. Mishing marriage is a mixture of traditional Mishing custom with that of Hindu rituals. The marriage is performed according to the Hindu form of marriage but no *homa* sacrifice is observed.³⁸ It is also observed that the folk songs called *midanhnitom*, expressing the sadness of the bride is a popular custom.³⁹ *Duglam-lanam* marriage of Mishing and *Kharsonnai* marriage of Bodo's takes place when a interested boy take away the girl and when there is a delay in the arrangement of the marriage or the parents are not happy with the bride respectively. In this marriage after a mutual agreement between boy and girl, the girl enters into the house of the boy. The consent of the parents is not taken into consideration. This type of union is common more or less in every society but cannot considered tradition of one's society. In *Bwnanwi lainai* marriage of Bodo, the bride is forcefully carried into the house of the bridegroom by his party and then the marriage is solemnized. *Dwnkharlangnai* marriage is not socially approved. This marriage is by elopement of both bride and bridegroom.⁴⁰ In *Dongkha habani* marriage a man comes and lives with a widow and the society recognizes this cohabitation and regularized the marriage according to social custom. In the Karbi society until a couple which has eloped does not offer a feast to the society they do not get social recognition and for their children marriage negotiation is impossible. In the Karbi society man acted as the head of the family. In certain situation like when a head of the family dies leaving the wife and children, his brother inherits the brother's widow wife. This custom is known as *Kopatang*.⁴¹

Marriage, a social institution played an important role in the Dimasa, Karbi, Mishing and Bodo societies, where clan restrictions were get more importance. The tradition of taking bride's price among the tribes is different. In the Dimasa society bride price or '*Kalti*' is determined by the bride's parents and given in the *Yaopara* (bride's handing over) ceremony. Karbi society use to pay the bride's price in the form of manual labour by the bridegroom in the bride's house by staying one or two years. In Bodo and Mishing society also the taking of bride's price is practiced. The Bodos without any demand of the bride's parents gave the

³⁷ *Social Life of the Mishing women*,

<http://ir.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/66483/10,p-52>

³⁸ A, Sarma, *Folk culture of The Mishing of Assam*, New Delhi, 2004, p-19

³⁹ Information gathered by a field survey in Dhamaji and Lakhimpur district.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p-67

⁴¹ K.C.Mahanta, *Encyclopaedia: Profile of North East*, Guwahati, 1998. p-395

price and the Mishing a minimum 100 or 50 rupees is given as bride's price. The custom of bride's price is a common practice among the said tribe. The Practicing of bride's price and property inheritance by the male relatives in absence of son and adopting son-in law to inherit property shows the masculine priority in the society.

Rice beer or '*Ju*' is an integral part not only in Dimasa marriage but also among the Bodos, Karbi's and Mishing. Rice beer is in fact a part of the diet in tribal culture. Rice beer is a part and parcel and an inseparable necessity of all medications, rituals and celebrations. All the festivals like birth and marriage need rice beer for welcoming the guests. Whenever negotiation take place to regularized abduction and elopements. In Dimasa marriage, after the *sandi-dangsingba* or the first proposal from the groom's party with salt, *Laothai langba* is conducted, where rice beer ('*Ju-dima*' and '*Ju-haro*') has to be taken in four small gourd shells (*laothai*) to the bride's house. Gourd is a large fruit with hard skin and soft flesh. It is dried and used as container. The gourd pots will be nicely decorated with banana-leaves separately. These pots are carried by three persons in traditional dress (*Gainthao, Rikhaosa, Sgaopha and white colour shirts*.) Then a date is fixed for meeting again regarding date of marriage.⁴² This custom is performed on any day except on Sunday, Thursday and Saturday, as it is believed that during bygone days human sacrifices were made on Sundays, Dimasa death ceremony is performed on Thursday and on Saturday they do not like to begin any auspicious function. Rice beer is again taken by the groom's party along with groom's father with only two little bottle gourds full of rice beer. On the day of marriage too rice beer is consumed by the village elders. Rice beer is also important in Karbi's, Bodo's and Mishing marriage ceremonies. Karbi rice beer is called as '*Horlang*' and in Mishing it is known as '*Apang*'. In the Mishing marriage proposal, they take with them two large container full of '*Apang*' and nine to ten puns of betel nut and betel leaf. This ceremony is called '*Yamnne tamnne*'⁴³ It can be said that the preparation of rice beer is considered sacred by all the tribes of this remote part of India and it occupies special recognition in many of the rituals, festivals, marriages and community gathering. The rice beer is considered as a source of merry making as well as to show due respect by offering it. In the Barak valley the three stages of

⁴² B.N,Bordoloi, Op.cit, p-55

⁴³ Social Life of the Mishing women,
<http://ir.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/66483/10,p-55>

pre-marriage ceremonies of Dimasa is conducted in single visit.⁴⁴ In this case three gourd pots rice beer are needed. The gourd pots are decorated with banana leaves separately, first one with seven banana leaves, second one with five and the last one with three banana leaves. In the brides house the first rice beer gourd is presented to the bride's parents by the bridegroom's party and informed their purpose of coming. After an hour's discussion, if the proposal is accepted by the bridegroom's parents then the second pot of rice beer is offered to the bridegroom's parents. The positive response is followed with joy and merry-making and the ritual about the bride price (*Kalti*) is discussed by offering the third pot of rice beer.

Traditionally the customs of exchanging cloths for the bride and groom in pre- marriage custom are absent in tribal society, which is very much popular, as '*Juron*' in Assamese society. But the custom of taking bath both by bride and bridegroom in their respective house is celebrated in Dimasa society like the Bodos. Water has an important place in Dimasa religious life. The construction of *Snawn* Temple (royal bath house) at Khaspur focused the practice of religious bath. In marriage, before taking place of the bathing custom, a traditional ritual is performed in the river, worshiping goddess Ganga in which betel-nuts and betel-leaves are made floated in the river. In this ritual women used to sing traditional songs. (*Ganga Bandana*). In Assamese this ritual is called *Nuwani* .in this ceremony all the close relatives from far and near, friends and neighbors' are invited. In front of the house two plantain trees have to be planted and on them a rope has to be hung, where mango leaves are tied. Lighting lamps keep in the hands of young girls to go along with elder women's to draw pure water from the well. In this ceremony only female participation is required. They also sing song and utter mantras while drawing water from the well. The application of black *dal* and turmeric paste is practiced among the Dimasa and Bodos, which is a common practice of the Assamese society. The bathing place is prepared in the middle of the courtyard and four plantain trees are planted. To take bath a short tool (*Khamlai*) is placed, in front lighting earthen lamp is placed and the place is decorated rice powder on the ground with mango leaves on the top and to fence off on three sides white thread is used. In front side facing to the bride or bridegroom, a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves are kept. Relatives and friends use to apply black *dal* and

⁴⁴ Dimasa Marriage, Source: Shodhganga.enflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/29474/08

turmeric paste but generally started by mother, aunt, elder sister and sister in laws respectively. Everyone who poured water to the bride and bridegroom is use to gifts new cloth or in cash as a token of blessing to the bride and bridegroom.⁴⁵ It is essential to send bride price (*Kalti*) to the bride's house before the marriage ceremony. The bride price along with twenty five numbers of untampered nuts and betel leaves are to be decorated in banana leaves and put into a decorated basket made of bamboo, which will be borne by two boys, who have their parents alive. The baskets are covered by white colored Dimasa traditional towel with beautiful designs in it. Three such baskets are prepared. One with bottles of rice beer, betel-nuts and betel-leaves along with the bride price, second one with dry fish and rice and the third one with new traditional cloths and jewellery for the bride. In this journey at least five or seven elderly persons are required to accompany including women.

In Dimasa marriage system influence of Hinduism is reflected. The rule for *Kunja* is such ritual that resembled with the greater Assamese society. A *Kunja* is a decorated with bamboo, banana tree and mango leaves, in the middle a decorated chair is placed for the groom to sit. In the *kunja* the bride will walk ceremonially seven times around the groom clockwise and every time of the completion of the round cast flower upon him. After the ritual is over the bride and bridegroom blessed with *purohit's* mantra. The newly wedded couple too took blessing from the traditional deities of Dimasa God and Goddess, which is known as *Ranachandi* and *sibrai*. This type of rituals is not seen among the contemporary tribes like Karbi's. However the role of *purohit* is absent in Dimasa society prior to Dimasa king conversation to Hinduism. It is said that in those days marriage was conducted in a simple way like Ahom's *Saklang* system instate of *Kunja ritual*.⁴⁶

Through the Ahoms, Mughal and British occupation of the Dimasa land, a long historical period, the Dimasa ornamentation culture flourished. The Dimasa traditional dress includes three pieces of colourful cloths for female. *Rijamphain* a white colour cloth which is worn from chest to knees, *Rigu* a wrapper or lower garment worn from waist to ankle which can be of various colours and

⁴⁵ Information gathered by an interview with Kamila defosa, Member Dimasa Sahitya Sabha, Dhansiri, Karbi Anglong, Assam.

⁴⁶ Taken interview with Najendra Nunisa, Member of Dimasa sahitya sabha, Diphu, dated 23/06/13

Rikhaosa which is resembling with Assamese *Riha* either of yellow, green or white in colour. It is worn above the chest wrapper or shoulders. Besides this *Rijamphain Beren (Ramai)*, the chest wrapper with stripes of bright colour like white, green, black, yellow (sometimes with orange) and red, is also weaved for the special occasion like *jukhuba* (marriage), *Busu* (harvesting festival) and *Bai-dima* (dimasa dance). Dimasa male clothing includes *Sgaopha* or *Phagri* a turban for head, *Rigdo* (a short muffler), *Risha* (short dhoti worn from waist to knee) and *Remshau* (shawl only of colour either white or yellow with colourful design embedded in white background). For the special occasion Dimasa male wear *Gainthao* (white long dhoti worn from waist to ankle worn only during marriage and dance), *Rikhaosa* (a long chaddar to take on the left shoulder), *Rithap* (a chaddar made from endi-silk worm) and a *Magong*, shawl of various colours. In Dimasa marriage, bride-grooms dress is woven especially as black colour is not entertained. The design and fabrics are same but the black colour is not used as black colour is regarded as symbol of sadness or darkness. There is no specific colour for bride and bridegroom among the contemporary tribes like Karbi, Bodos and Mishing. Karbi traditional dress *pini* or the lower garment or a wrapper from waist to knee is always in black colour and *peckok* is also designed in various colours along with black colour. Mishing traditional dress too uses of black colour in bride-grooms dress is not a taboo. Bodos wear their traditional dress *dokhma agor* (beautifully designed female garment) of orange colour.

We can assume the importance of jewellery ornamentation of the Dimasa in festive occasions like marriage. Unlike the dresses, traditional jewelleryes of the tribes are somehow replica of each other. Necklaces of coins are named in different name by the tribes, but are worn by every tribe. The Dimasas named it *Rangbarsa*, karbi called it *Lek-chiki* and the Bodos as *Bisahar*. The necklace of coins is also most well known jewellery of *Riang* tribe of Tripura, as Tripuri Jewellery. Karbi silver bracelet called *Prinsoroi* and Dimasa silver bracelet called *khadu* is similler to each other making different in carving designs in it. These two tribel jewellery of Karbi and Dimasa is a smaller form of Assamese *Gam-kharu*. The Karbi female ear-ring *Nothenpi* is a replica of Assamese jewellery *Thuria*. Jewellery the most adorable artistic object of women can be exchange the origin of jewellery culture is a matter of discussion but their use in marriage is

remarkable. However the use of jewellery is not just as an embellishment, but also as a sign of prestige as they believe that jewellery enhances their womanhood. Widows in Dimasa society did not use heavy jewellery like *Rangbarsa*, *chandrahar* but simply ear-rings in her daily life but on the death of the husband she takes off all her ornament and remains in mourning.⁴⁷

Another notable feature of the tribal society is the role of the young generation. The bachelors' dormitory played an important role in the marriage ceremony. It is the duty of the young boys to cut bamboos and plantain leaves, for making baskets and wedding gate as well as to decorate the *Kunja*. From the bamboo, glasses are also arranged. *Nodrang* in this ceremony take active leadership in '*mandop*' construction and distributing food and meat along with the rice beer in the marriage day.⁴⁸ The Mishing boys Bachelor's dormitory, *murong* and girl's *resang* were active organization during marriages but the girls dormitory *resang* is however lost in present period.⁴⁹

Birth ceremony is another important custom of Dimasa life cycle. The coming of a new born is an occasion of joy in the family. Dimasa have their own conception of pro-creation and they regarded woman like the mother earth. A pregnant woman is taken with care and ceremonies are there related to a new born. In the early stage of pregnancy, no precautionary measures are adopted and the woman is allowed to carry on her usual work. In the advanced stage of pregnancy, however, she is not allowed to move outside the village and visit the cremation ground for the fear of harming the child in the womb by the evil spirit. The husband of the pregnant woman has to play an important role. He has to worship *Naisod-Nusodi*, the goddess of child welfare, by sacrificing a hen, for ensuring the safe and easy birth of the child. This ritual is called *Daosa rathaiba*.

At the time of delivery the woman is helped by one experienced midwife called *Hojaijuli* and she is assisted by another woman called *Barwaju*. The new born baby is placed on a piece of plantain leaf. The umbilical cord is generally cut by the father of the baby with a razor made from the upper cover of a piece of bamboo. *Hojaijuli* with the help of the *Barwaju* buries the placenta under the caves

⁴⁷ S.T.Das, *Life style, Indian Tribes: Locational Practice*, vol-1, 1987, p-102.

⁴⁸ Still practice in the Dimasa and Karbi society.

⁴⁹ A.Sarma, *Folk Culture of the Mishings of Assam*, New Delhi, 2004, p-14

of the house. A small *dao* or knife is always kept under the bed of a child with a view to protecting it from evil spirit. Bodos also believes in same way and piece of iron or a knife or a sickle is kept below the bed.⁵⁰ Purification is necessary for the midwife *Hojajuli* and her assistant *Brawaju*. They go a river, break an egg and take bath, whereas mother is isolated and this period of isolation lasts till the naval chord of the new born falls off and the purifying ceremony of mother of the child or the *Ha-tharba* ritual takes place. In the Mishing society seclusion period is for three days. On the third day, they perform a ceremony known as *susi*. In Mishing society female priest is an important phenomenon. *Satula*, the Mishing village priest is invited to perform the ceremony, in case of son there is male *satula* and in case of daughter female *satula* is invited. *Satula* purified the new born baby by trimming locks of hair from the forehead. The *satula* also selects a name for the newborn baby. *Apang* (Mishing rice bear) is also an integral part in the purification ceremony. The invited guests are entertained with *Apang* and other food items. Whereas in Dimasa society, during the isolated period mother of the new baby is not allowed to cook and fetch water for others and even the father of the child cannot go out for three days from the day of the birth.⁵¹ No religious work is performed in the village until the purification is done, even rice beer also not brewed in the house. The umbilical cord is buried in the front yard in case of male child, while for a female child; it is done in the backyard of the house. On the same day ritual of shaving hair of the baby (*khanai-gusu garba*) is performed without preference to any gender. The hair cutting ceremony is performed by the Bodos only in case of male child. This ritual is done by the father or by a senior male member from the father's clan in the Dimasa society. Elderly women's participation in this ritual is important. They bring vegetables, eggs and a hen along with rice and other necessary material like turmeric, salt, mustered oil to prepare lunch from the market not from the house of the new born baby but took the cash to buy the materials. They cook outside the house in a temporary kitchen. No male member is allowed to take the prepared lunch. Woman folk take the lunch along with the mother of the new born baby. *Nana dihonba* is another ritual after the purification ritual of *Ha-tharba*, the baby is taken out of the four walls of the house

⁵⁰ Dr.P.C.Bhattacharya, *Asomia Sanskriti Jana-jatir Barangini; Asomia Sanskriti*, Assam Sahitya sabha,1962

⁵¹ S.K.Borpujari, Op.cit, p-127

after bath, showing him or her the sun and the people assembled there. A peculiar custom during this is spitting on the face of the baby by the maternal uncle after chewing a little quantity of sesame is done.⁵² Maybe it is to make safe from the evil eyes. Then puffed rice and a drop of *Ju-dima* on a finger tip are placed into the mouth of the baby. This is an indispensable custom during the *Nana-dihonba* ritual, because of that rice beer is brewed specially. Rice beer and meat curry along with rice is offered to goddess of '*Naisodi-nusodi*' on seven plantain leaves in case of a male child and five plantain leaves for a female child. In case of Bodo we found the use of *dub* grass, a few holy basil leaves and a ring of gold while purifying the new born.⁵³

Relating to child rituals like '*Annaprasana*' of Assamese people, Dimasa practiced '*khalai-rinang*'. Here '*khalai*' means 'dish' and '*rinang*' means 'to give'. For this no definite time is fixed, a auspicious day is selected but the day should be Friday. In this ritual family relatives and other guest are invited for lunch. The child is allowed to sit in the gathering and parents feed three times and then child used to take the meal. The importance lies in this ritual is to give a place in the society. There is no custom of feeding by maternal uncle to the child like the Assamese society. There is no formal feeding of a Bodo baby. But when a boy is five years old, his maternal uncle comes and shaves off his head however Bodo's sometime used to feed the child for the first time at the age between five and seven months, which very much similar with that of Assamese, suspected to be an influence of Aryan Hindus.⁵⁴ We do not come across any such ritual among the contemporary Karbi's. One common practice among the Dimasa and Karbi's is believes in rebirth. The *Jonthai* or the traditional Dimasa priest used to tell the past life identity of the child. Generally Dimasa believed the clan member from close family relatives used to take rebirth. In karbi society too thus sometimes names are given according to their past identity. Karbi believes death as a transition to a new identity, both physical and spiritual-through time and space.⁵⁵ A mother is reborn to

⁵² B.N,Bordoloi, *Op.cit*, p-50

⁵³ Information gathered by an interview with P.Basumotary, Assitt Prof, Department of Bodo, Diphu Government College Diphu, Karbi Anglong, Assam.

⁵⁴ J.Das, *Folklore of Assam*, New Delhi,1972,p-77

⁵⁵ Dhorom Sing Teron,*Karbi Studies*,vol-2, Diphu, Karbi Anglong,2011,p-80

her brother as daughter, a father to his son as a son, reliving the genetic relation, all over again.

Death is another important truth of human life cycle. In the Dimasa society a person is allowed to die inside the dwelling house unlike the Bodos and the Assamese. Soon after death a cock is sacrificed by a male member of the family near the head of the deceased. It is believed that the sacrificed cock will show the deceased the right way to the heaven and egg symbolizes rebirth.⁵⁶ For a Karbi, there is no question of going to Heaven or Hell after death.⁵⁷ There is no vocabulary for such abstract termed as 'heaven' or 'hell'.⁵⁸ The Dimasa cremate the dead. The burying of the dead appears to have been a common custom amongst all the non-Aryan people of Assam. Hindu influences however, have induced some of them to take to burning. Thus tribes which are still outside still outside the pale of Hinduism like the Akas, the Adis, the Daflas and most of the Nagas bury the dead.⁵⁹ The Ahoms before they embraced Hinduism used to bury their dead. The Karbi and the Mishing tribe are stucked with their traditional system of burying their dead. Bodos however practice the two accordingly. Every tribe has their own ceremony for the last journey of human being from the living world. Assam the museum of races, because of its geographical location in one of the great migration routes of mankind.⁶⁰ Different tribe practices their death ceremony in different ways. In Karbi and Dimasa death ceremonies, we can understand the tribe's their myth and mythology. In Dimasa society, before the dead body is taken to the cremation ground called *Mangphlang* the body is bathed ceremonially and then placed on a bier (*Bangfong*) made of split bamboo. The Bodo also constructed a trolleys made of a raw bamboo. But the trellis of Dimasa and Karbi's are of artistic hands and it has four fence made of bamboo, leaving upside open to put the dead body. One can assume the economic condition of the deceased family in making a trolley (*Bangfong*). The number of bamboo used in the making of this trollis or bier shows the social status of the deceased. Before taking the body to the cremation ground,

⁵⁶ P.Misra, *Folklore in North East India: Myth and Rituals of The Dimasa-Kacharis of Assam*, New Delhi /Guwahati, 1985, p-111

⁵⁷ Rex.L.Jones, *Shamanism in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey*, Source: *History of religions*, vol.7, University of Chicago Press, 1968. p-330

⁵⁸ Dhorom Sing Teron, *Karbi Studies*, vol-2, Diphu, Karbi Anglong, 2011, p-80

⁵⁹ J.Das, *Op.cit*, p-77

⁶⁰ P.C. Choudhury: *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to through 20th century*, Guwahati, Delhi. 1987, p-75

new clothes is put on according to sex of the deceased, where there is a taboo in using any colour. Red colour in any circumstances is not used. They believe that if the dead body is consigned to flames with red colour on, the deceased in next birth is likely to suffer from leprosy. Use of silver in form of coins is found in the death ceremony. A few one rupee silver coins are placed on the forehead, eyes and mouth of the dead body. The last journey is always an event of mourning and closed one wept, whereas in Dimasa and Karbi society, a group of old lady sit around the dead body and start weeping by singing. This type of melancholy song near the dead is called Dirge. '*Kachar-he-Abang*' and '*Garasenang*' are the traditional Dirge in Karbi and Dimasa respectively, which is a unique ceremony among the tribes of Assam. In karbi this ceremony is continued till the dead body is taken out to the cremation ground. Karbi keeps the deceased for three days. The Karbi Dirge is all about the coming and returned journey of '*Karjong*' (soul). References' of mountains, rivers, jungles and vegetables are present in the Karbi Dirge, Dimasa the Dirge however practiced for three days until the temporary hut of soul is put in fire along with the deceased dish, glasses and the utensils which were used to cooked food to offer to the soul.



Figure 29: Photograph showing Dimasa singing dirge near the deceased

The Dimasa dirge is a narration of the origin of the deceased, identity, ancestors and a lot of questions are asked regarding him or her absence, and how the other family members will survive. The death among the Karbis is not all the lengthy laments of the *kachar-he-Abong*. The return journey of a Karbi soul is described by the *kachar-he-Abong* or *charhepi* as lonely, dreary and difficult, while at the same time the living relatives are equally concerned and anxious of its early

return, through rebirth.⁶¹ Among the Dimasa, there is a strong faith that the deceased will be reborn in his own house or in one of the houses of his close relatives. While the dead body is carried to the cremation ground, a woman continuously throws paddy and cotton on both sides of the village road from a basket while another woman draws raw cotton thread along the road leading to the cremation ground. Throwing the cotton and paddy and drawing of raw cotton thread along the road signifies the fact that the soul of the deceased will recognize the path leading to its village and home and this will enable him to return to the earth in the shape of a new born child. The process may be regarded as the construction of a bridge between the dead and the living and it is called '*Kunyaocry Maiyaocry Saiba*.'⁶² In the Bodo death ceremony, a few coins and cowries shell are buried along with the dead body. This custom is also practiced by the Dimasa and Karbis. It is believed that the soul of the dead may required to cross a river on boat by paying the fare to the boat man or the soul may be required to purchase some foods on the journey. A pitcherful of fresh water is placed on the grave as a drink for the dead along with cocked rice.⁶³ The Dimasa and Bodo however take the cowries back home after the cremation, whereas Karbi bring back the cowries at the time of *Chamangkan* or death ceremony. The funeral pyre with seven layers of bamboo and logs are generally constructed in the cremation ground which is a common practice of the Dimasa, Bodos and Assamese. A unique feature of the Dimasa ritual is the construction of a temporary hut there so that the soul may take rest for time being. This temporary hut is called '*Jara*'. A closed basket made of bamboos and a piece of cloth *Rino*, (a small piece of white cloth, which is taken to cremation ground to bring back the soul of the deceased) is carried with the funeral procession.

The *Rino* is opened in the temporary hut called *Jara* and rice beer is offered to the soul or the spirit of the dead person at the *Jara*, whereas in case of the Bodos water is offered with the help of the leaves of the Indian fig tree.⁶⁴ The Dimasa have a strong bonding which is also seen in the cremation ground. Two sons of the deceased or in their absence two same clan member set fire to the pyre. In making

⁶¹ Dhorom Sing, Op.cit, p-81

⁶² B.N,Bordoloi,Op.cit, .p-59

⁶³ K.Brahma,A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs Practices And Ceremonies of Bodos, Calcutta,1992,p-72

⁶⁴ Ibid,p-72

the bier, bringing the bier in the absence of male issues of the deceased and in arranging bamboo and logs for the pyre is done by the clan member and family members. Again contribution of one kilogram rice and a rice beer bottle is a general practice of Dimasa people to the deceased house for the purification ritual, without concerning the economic condition of the deceased. In particular every (clan) *Sengphong* member of the deceased, in case of male and every *julu* (female clan) member in case of female used to contribute a fixed amount for the purification ritual. In the present period only clan contribution of both male and female is practiced. All the rituals are to be performed through the medium of priest who is called *Jonthai*. The priest has special knowledge about the deities and the spirits and they know the art of propitiating the spirits and gods. Dimasa priesthood is hereditary and from the Hasnusa clan senior member is eligible for the priesthood. Karbi's used to take contribution from every house of a *Rong* (village), where a person is died. Village headman called '*Rong Sarthe*' (goanbura) used to fix the amount to be paid.

The news of a death in Mishong society is informed by ringing a bell called *lenong*, which is practiced from very ancient time. As we mentioned that the dead of the average Mishong generally receive an earth burial. The families who accept *Vaisnava Dharma* and belong to the fold of *Sankara Songha* also practice earth burial. The corpse is washed, oiled and new cloths are put on and its hair is combed with a wooden comb and is taken out from the house. The fireplace of the kitchen called *moirum* is removed from its place and is newly set up. An *epoo* (bamboo mate) is used to wrap the corpse and carried to the burial ground on a pier made of bamboo. Every one offers a handful of soil into the grave and says, "We do not kill you, go to your own place, give your back to us." All the cloths, utensils of the deceased are buried along with the corpse. A symbolic house is built and a white sheet of cloth is erected over it.⁶⁵

The Dimasas have special regards for water and rivers. According to the Dimasa folklore life on this planet originated on the bank of the rivers. The word itself means the son of the rivers. The purification ceremony is practiced by every tribe as well as non-tribes of North East India, like the rest. In Dimasa

⁶⁵ A.Sarma, *Folk Culture of The Mishong of Assam*, New Delhi, 2004, p-23

purification reverence of water is noticed. When the dead body is taken to the cremation ground, some family relatives wash the floors and the plinths of the houses with muddy water. Gold, silver and copper with *tulsi* leaves in water is regarded as holy and sprinkled over all cloths and household article. Another holy water called *Dither* is prepared for bath by village priest (*jonthai*) for the people who attended the funeral. Two type of holy water is used by the Dimasa. In case of first one it may be due to influence of the Hinduism and the later one seems traditional.

On the seventh day a post funeral ceremony called *Ju Mangsaou kainba* is observed. In this ceremony the villagers' who had attended the funeral at the cremation ground are invited to drink rice beer. A day is also fixing for the next ceremony called *Maimum-Tharba*, literally means purification of paddy. Observance is a must, but there is no hard and fast rule regarding the exact date of performance. Until the ritual is done, food is to be offered to the spirit of the dead person at the *Jara* by an elderly member of the family every day. It indicates the ceremony as a farewell to the spirit and without the feast the soul is not free to take another birth. The Dimasa society is now in a transition period in culture and today customs are a little different then before due to *Sanscritization*. Dimasa *shardha* or *Maimumm Tharba* is influenced by the Hindu rituals and so in some cases 'kirton' became part of the purification ceremony. But in no cases Assamese Brahmin is used nor the language for the 'Kirton' ceremony. The influence of Bengale Brahmins was started during the royal days when Dimasa king *Krishnschandra* converted to Hinduism. Bengalee script and language became a part of the Dimasa life. The Dharmadi Guru or the Raj Pandit, who was always a Bengalee Brahmin, was the sole interpreter of the Hindu law. The Raj Darbar was also adorned by a galaxy of Brahmins.⁶⁶ Bodo's *shraddha* ceremony is started with prayer before the altar of the *Bathou*⁶⁷ and then the villagers and relatives of the dead person are entertained with rice beer, meat and cocked rice. Giving alms in the form of coins among the children and to set a bullock free in the name of the dead person is practiced among the Bodo's. The elder son of the dead person have to unclean the leaf-plates left after guests have eaten food and throw them away, which indicates

⁶⁶ J.B.Bhattacharjee, *Social and Polity Formations in Pre-Colonial North-East India*, New Delhi,1991,p-146

⁶⁷ *Siju tree* (*Euphorbia splrndens*)

removing of impurity.⁶⁸ The death ceremony of the Karbi's is very much different comparing with any other tribe of Assam. The death ceremony is called as 'Chomkan' or 'Karhi' in Karbi society, is a celebration of death,⁶⁹ also sometimes known as *Chamangkan*. It is a farewell ceremony of the spirit of the death.⁷⁰ It is generally observed for four days. Although, *Chomkan* is a funeral ceremony, ironically it is the gayest and the grandest of all festivals of the karbi's. According to B.N.Bordoloi, the karbi concept of death depends primarily on three factors, namely, the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and rebirth. The dead therefore, commands as much respect as the living. The Karbi traditional belief recognizes the God of death, 'Yama' and that the spirit of the dead has a world of its own. *Chom Arong* or *Yama Arong* which means 'the city of Yama' which is supposed to be located on a hill known as Lang Serve lying beyond an inaccessible hill called *Mukindang Anglong*.⁷¹ *Chomkan* is must, unless one performs it, the soul of the dead can neither enters the proper abode nor be reborn in the family. The myth of the Karbi in this concerned is similar with the Hindu mythology and it is compulsory irrespective of social status and economic positions, to performed the *chomkan* among the Hindu Karbis. The rhythmic sounds of Karbi folk drums that once announced the ensuing funeral festival in a village nearby are fading into oblivion.



Figure 30: Photograph showing Karbi dancers in Chamkan

⁶⁸ K.Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs Practices And Ceremonies of Bodos*, Calcutta,1992,p-74

⁶⁹ Dhorom Sing Teron, *Op.cit*, ,p-79

⁷⁰ R.Lalsim, *Tribes of N.C.Hills, Assam*, Haflong,2005,p-172

⁷¹ *Ibid*,p-173

There are three type of *chomkan*, namely, *Harne*, *langtuk* and *kanphaphla*. The first is considered as the highest in status and the third and the last is the lowest in rank. Traditionally, the first and the second one can be observed only by people of high social and economic status. The third *kanphaphla*, is the most commonly observed among the karbi society. *Chomkan* is



Figure 31: Photograph showing Karbi women during *Chomkan*

observed for four days. The first day of *Chomkan* begins with the ceremony of *Ruh Kehum*, which means bringing back the soul from the *tipit* or cremation ground to the house of the deceased. Use of Cowries in Karbis religious life is present. Cowries, which were temporarily buried along with the deceased is dug out and taken back to home by nicely wrapping it with a piece of black cloth. The *cowries* treated with great honor as a living soul. Traditional village women crier called *Uchepi* and two pair muster drummers are the sole leader of the soul bringing ceremony. They offered cooked rice, rice beer and betel nuts and betel leaves to the spirit is called *Anjam* while the *uchepi* sing a song of lamentation called *kacharhe Anang* as discussed earlier, joined by any other old woman.(traditionally, such kind of women crier and elegy singer was prevalent in the Karbi society) the *uchepi* along with the family members appease the spirit of the deceased by offering *Anjam* and after the invoking is completed, on the fourth and the last day the effigy of the deceased made from paddy straws is then carried out to the cremation ground in full honors as they do a real body. Finally, the effigy is then made to be consumed by fire in a pyre. Making of effigy and cremated in pyre is a symbolic process of the reality. May be it is done due to failure of celebrating the ceremony just in time they do so. According to Dharamsing Teron, social activist and writer, the primitive Karbis made it sure that the *karhi* or the *chomkan* is performed at the earliest and persisted with the custom to perform *karhi* with the corpse known as *Arpun karhi*. And this custom probably continued till the early part of the 19th

century as indicated in the records of the American Baptist missionaries (1986).⁷² Song and Dance played an important role in the Karbi funeral ceremony. Songs are generally depicted the land and region in which once their ancestors settled, how they originated, whom they had fought with in a poetical form. The youths start singing *Kapa-er* on the first day of the *chomkan*, when the offering of *Anjam* to the deceased in the inner room of the house is over even when the *uchepi* continuing her lamentation. The song is the most vulgar one with obscene words that can be uttered by a human being. It is due to Karbi belief that in 'the city of death' everything is opposite to this world and so that the obscene song will be a good glee song for the deceased in the city of dead.⁷³ *Mir-ring-rang* a funeral dance is accompanied by the song and two piece of split bamboo locked together, symbolizing male-female cohabitation is used. There is absolutely no barrier on the use of explicitly suggestive erotic songs and utterances during the festival, which lasted for about a week. The '*Mi-ring-rang*' song probably represented the last vestiges of the primitive fertility-rites prevalent among the Karbis.⁷⁴ A warrior dance, *chomkedam* is performed during *chomkan*, representing a warrior's struggle against the evil spirit. The use of sword or *nok* in the right hand and a shield or *chong* made of rhinoceros skin in left hand, is another element of the *chomkan* festival of the Karbis, where drum beating is necessary. A dance of young ones, *Nimsokerung* is also performed and a dance of able bodied, *Banjar kekan* is performed. The extensive practice of song and dance in a funeral ceremony is rare among the tribes. Dimasa, Bodos and other contemporary tribes of Assam did not hold this type of tradition. Though the culture has no barriers, in this case custom remain identical to the karbi tribe. *Karhi* or the *chomkan*, as the celebration of death is gasping for breath. This funerary ritual that embodies the philosophy of death and rebirth, eroticism and fertility, the art of music and dance, and a communal cultural activity, is in essence the cultural edifice of the Karbis. It becomes a tragedy now as the *chomkan* or *karhi* is well becoming only a celebration of death and decay, reflecting the crude realities within the karbi society which itself is gasping for survival between tradition and modernity. *Mi-ring-rang*' song too, under the spell

⁷² Dhorom Sing Terang, *Op.cit*,p-80

⁷³ R.Lalsim, *Op.cit*,p-175

⁷⁴ D.S. Terang, *Opcit*,p-81

of a modern day taboo described by some as ‘the crisis of modernity’, the erotic folklore of the karbis has vanished almost without a trace.

Songs however played an important role in the life and history of the tribe’s of Northeast India. In most cases tribal song carries the character of an oral tradition so as an oral literature. Prof. *B.N.Dutta*, an eminent musician and folklorist includes music, dance and drama mainly in the purview of performing arts. Relying on anthropology, he says that ‘music, dance and drama, however, elementary, have always formed important constituents of human culture since the earliest periods of human society.’ Tribal art forms conform to the tribal patterns of the respective ethnic affiliation’ and probably ‘had little to do with ‘sophisticated’ or ‘high’ arts’.⁷⁵ The marriage songs, lullabies, the dirge songs, festive songs are important. It is known fact from the pages of history that other than Ahom no other records were recovered as earliest one. The hymns, proceedings of rituals are all continued from one generation to next from mouth to mouth. Songs that are sung by the tribes in their festivals also have meaning to understand one’s culture in better way. The Dimasas are a wild and colourful tribe; their mild and jovial nature distinguishes them from many other tribes. They are very much fond of music and dances which play an important role in their day today life.⁷⁶ Tarun Goswami, an eminent musicologist, folklorist and well known vocalist of Hindustani classical music rightly says that the Dimasa music is an essentially as water from the brooks in the hills. Their innate musical vibrations impel them to try their hands on the different musical instrument like the *Muree Wathisa*, *the Kharam*, *the Mureema* and the *Kharam Dobong*.⁷⁷ Marriage songs are sung among the Dimasa, Bodos, Mishing and Karbi tribe along with the some other tribes of north east India. In every stages of Dimasa marriage is ornamented by song. There is a song to fetch water, for the bath of bride and bridegroom called *Ganga Bandana*, the song is about seeking blessing from the Goddess *Ganga*. The song is like; O mother *Ganga!* You are all in all on this earth. You please keep all of us well, bless us, you are our mother. You please show us good path and lead us. *Bhagirath* has brought you on the earth and all the persons committing sins are free from them by

⁷⁵ Dr.B.N,Dutta, *A study of the folk Culture of the Goalpara District of Assam*,Guhati,1973,p-390

⁷⁶ B.N,Bordoloi, *Op.cit*, p-48

⁷⁷ Tarun Goswami, *Tuning in to Dimasa folk-instruments’*, Dimapur,1992,p-1

receiving our touch.⁷⁸ From this song we can understand Dimasa knowledge of *Ganga and Bhagiratha* and their great respect for water. Dimasa have special regard for water and rivers. According to Dimasa folklore life on this planet originated on the bank of the rivers.⁷⁹ The word Dimasa itself means the sons of the great river. The reverence for water is noticed when the Dimasa purify themselves by touching *digather* which means pure water. There are songs for taking bath of bridegroom and bride, dressing up of bride, departure of bride and ritual of *Saapaak*⁸⁰ and for all stages. From these songs we can see the influence of Hinduism in Dimasa culture. Karbi wedding song is sung in question and answer fashion, which is called as '*Adam-Asar*' and also known as '*Thelu a-lun*'⁸¹. Karbi marriage is impossible without the *Adam Asar* song, which describes the progression of the various stages of the ritual till it concludes. We can call a narrative of the marriage; the song did not influenced by the sanscritization, keeping with its very primitive nature. Bodos and Mishings also sung marriage song. Song and dance is an important part of the festive occasion of the tribes. The Karbis have a good number of traditional dances and songs for different occasions. The harvesting festival is known as *Hachakekan*, while *Rongker* is a village welfare festival and *Ritnomgchingdi* is related to seeding and sowing. Among the important festivals of the Dimasa Busu, the harvesting festival, Rajini Garba, house welfare ritual and Harni Garba, worship for the protection of the village is practiced as community festivals. But unlike the Karbi all the festivals dance and music is not required. Busu or the harvesting festival is the one where dance and music is performed. During the Busu, song of harvest *jaufinbani*, cultivation song *Ha-yaobani* and *Busu jibani* or *Busu* celebration songs are sung besides these song love song, lullabies, songs for existence and historical songs are important. Bodos too are very rich in folk songs. For every festivals and ceremonies song are there. The *Boisagu* festival, celebration of New Year is important merrymaking festival, where not only young boys and girls, the elder persons also joined in song and dance. Assamese *Bihu*, *Dimasa Busu*, *Bodos Boisagu*, and *Mishings Bihus* all are community festival with little variation. *Bihu* is the greatest festival of Assamese people. There are three types of *Bihu*. But we cannot confine to one section of the

⁷⁸ Collected from Lotica Hasnu, age-76, Dhansiri village, dated-06/12/14

⁷⁹ S. Sen, *Folklore in North East India*, New Delhi, 1985, p-109

⁸⁰ Ritual of Seven rounds by the bride.

⁸¹ Dhorom Sing Teron, *Op.cit*, p-37

people in it. It is secular in concept because it is intimately connected with agriculture. It must have had its origins in some primitive tribal life. Even today the Mishings have two *Bihus* of their own, apart from the three *Bihus* common to all Assamese. As Dr. Prafulladatta Goswami writes: “Astronomically, *Bahag Bihu* is associated with the vernal equinox, *Kati Bihu* with the autumn equinox and *Magh Bihu* with the winter solstice.”⁸²

Apart from socio-religious life of the tribe, they are ornamented with various materials in their daily life. Dimasa material culture as we have discussed in our previous chapter represents their developed culture and technology. They are ornamented with self-made materials. Weaving, Handicraft in bamboo and cane, preparing rice beer and ornamentation with jewellery are important aspects of Dimasa life and History.

North east India a meeting place of various tribes, with their own culture and identity contributes greater Assamese culture. Here the question arises to whom we consider Assamese? Recent discussions also failed to give any definite answer or conclusion. In the pages of history whenever we come to the discussions concerning Assamese, it started with the Ahom conversion to Hinduism or adaptation of Brahmanism. Before the advent of the Ahoms in Assam Tribes like, Bodos, Dimasa, Karbis, Mishings and Morans, Borahis were the original inhabitants. *Sukapha* the founder of the Ahom rule in Assam accompanied with him only few people including Ahom priest *Bailung*. They first appeared in Assam only in early 13th century A.D. they had to take local women as wives and also adopted the local cultural life, though they did not entirely discard their own background.⁸³ It may be due to matrimonial relations with the local people and that we all know there is no barrier in culture, assimilation and adoption of culture takes place in creating a present greater Assamese society.

⁸² J. Das, *Folklore of Assam*, New Delhi, 1972, p-79

⁸³ J. Das, *Ibid*, p-47