

## **An Analysis of Traditional Household Wood Crafts of Manipur**

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### **Abstract**

Wooden artifacts are a worthy part of material culture in Manipur. The people of Manipur are well known for their mastery of pottery making, bamboo and cane craft, weaving and textile, wood carving, etc. Different types of ethnic groups and Manipuri communities have contributed to the art and culture of Manipur. There are thirty-three (33) different tribes inhabited in the hill areas. Wooden artifacts are mostly found in the villages of Senapati District, Ukhrul District, Tamenglong District, and Bishnupur District of Manipur. A variety of wood crafts are now preserved in different museums which are run by the state government and private agencies. These museums are the storehouses of different kinds of art and cultural antiquities. The wood crafts are also representing the material culture of the state which has different functions on different occasions. This paper deals with the household wooden artifacts of Manipur with references to some museum collections.

**Keywords:** Traditional household wood crafts, tribal art and craft, role of the museum, the ethnic culture of Manipur etc.

### **Introduction**

Manipur is a state located in the North-Eastern part of India sharing the boundaries with three Indian states Nagaland (north), Mizoram (south), Assam (west) and internationally Myanmar to its eastside. It has maintained its glorious art and craft from the inception of the civilisation. It has also maintained its identity through different cultural activities in the society. The people of Manipur are well known in the mastery of pottery making, bamboo and cane crafts, weaving and textiles and wood carvings etc. There are different ethnic groups and communities who have significantly contributed to the art and culture of Manipur. There are 33 different recognised tribes inhabited in the hill and plain areas of Manipur. These ethnic tribes are individually very much distinct and unique in several ways. This distinctness and differences are point out by their artistic sense, tradition, culture, customs, and unique lifestyles.

According to K. Shantibala Devi – “In studying the material culture and the objects of use by the tribes in their everyday life and in their socio-cultural life, the characteristics features highlighting each tribe from the others, comes to the fore. The material culture, therefore, offers an insight into the differing characters of the individual tribes in the state.” (Devi, 2000)

They are still pursuing their traditional way of living. Their lifestyle has been represented with cultural activities, beliefs, customs, rituals etc. They use their traditional household material like textiles, basketry, pottery, and wooden artifacts in everyday life.

The ethnic communities in the North-Eastern states are using several wooden artifacts in everyday life at their houses. These artifacts, generally called household objects, are used as kitchen utensils, carrying tools and decoration tools etc. This paper deals with such kind of household wooden artifacts of the tribes of Manipur with references to some museum's collection. Wooden artifacts are a valuable part of material culture in Manipur. Wooden artifacts are mostly found in the villages of Senapati District, Ukhrul District, Tamenglong District, and Bishnupur District of Manipur. Earlier, these ethnic tribes had to depend on natural resources from their surroundings due to communication barriers and insurgencies. As a result, they started using wood as a material for making household objects. They used to make wooden bowls, dishes, mugs, spoons, grinders, mortar and pestle etc. These artifacts are used as kitchen utensils, for rituals, and in traditional ceremonies.

**According to Lokendra Arambam** – “... *there are so much of difference in meaning and purpose of the artifacts in use in tribal life.*” (Bahadur & Santabai, Y. 1996a)

They kept some ideas and concepts in their mind during the making of wooden objects. They used to make these items by ‘Dao’ (cutter used to cut bamboo and wood) and axes as tools. The tribes, such as the Mao, the Tangkhul, the Anal, the Paomei and the Kabui tribes (Zeme, Liangmei, Chiru etc sub-tribes of Kabui) are particularly known for the making of wooden objects. These wooden artifacts are usually found in every dormitory and house including headman's and rich man's houses. The artifacts include carvings of different designs and motifs related to rituals. Such as animals, birds, insects, human figures (hunters), floral motifs, geometrical shapes, textile patterns, and other objects related to those particular tribes. These motifs also feature the community practices, philosophy of tribes, social status, and customs, which symbolize the physical attributes of life along with awareness in the direction of art & culture.

**According to Mutua Bahadur and Y. Santabai** – “*At each carved houses of tribes, it was customary to have animal heads, especially buffalo heads and mithun (brofontalis) heads. These animal heads have their distinctive differences from one village to another.*” (Bahadur & Santabai, Y. 1996b)

It is also found that before starting a process of carving on the front wall of the house they used to perform some rituals in the traditional way. During this performance, they use their household objects for serving. These household objects are not only functional as usable utensils in their daily life, it's also important as a part of their rituals. It is also observed that the tribes of the neighboring states who are inhabited in hilly areas, also have the traditions of making wooden artifacts. It is clear from the above assumption that these material cultures have been executed only by the ethnic tribes and later on it is adopted in some areas by the other communities. That means the transformation of cultural aspects has been made during different phases. The human race is developed through the process of changes and transformation of individual lifestyles. In this process, one can adopt knowledge from his elders in the beginning of learning, after that a modification of the adopted knowledge pursued according to situations and again transform to the next generation. So, adaptation, modification, and transformation are the natural changes in the development of human civilisation.

## **Methodology**

The present paper has been carried out through field visits to major wood craft centres, museums, studios of artists, and artisans in Manipur. Personal interviews, meetings and conversations have been conducted with the resource persons, craftsmen, artists and artisans through questionnaire methods to know the traditional knowledge, historical background and utility factors of the wood crafts. The stylistic and artistic analyses have been exercised through the visual observations of the original wood crafts. For that, photographs of the original wood crafts and household wooden items have been taken from the major museums and craft centers of Manipur. The wood crafts have been selected randomly for artistic analysis and discussion.

## **Results and discussion**

A variety of objects are now kept in different museums of Manipur. These museums are run by the government and private agencies. It can be said that these museums are the storehouse of different kinds of art objects, materials and antiquities. These museums have many rare collections of tribal and non-tribal wooden crafts from different corners of the state. Most of the collections are very attractive, valuable, and closely connected with the material culture of Manipur.

### **Different kinds of Woodcrafts**

According to museum authorities - these are all traditional wood crafts which were mostly used in earlier times by the tribes. “Mutua Museum (Andro Cultural Heritage Museum)” (A private museum at Andro, Imphal East) is one of the most resourceful museums in Manipur. This museum is run by Sri Mutua Bahadur (a collector, writer, and director of the Museum). It has so many different collections of wooden artifacts including replicas of traditional houses of the tribes, stone reliefs of gods and goddesses, and other crafts. “Tribal Museum and Research Centre” is another private museum situated in the heart of the city (Sagolband, Imphal) and it is a storehouse of different kinds of artifacts run by Sri Y. Gyaneshwar Singh (Director of TMRC). This museum also organizes different types of workshops on wood carving, pottery making, bamboo and cane craft, etc. with the collaboration of state’s cultural department and other government agencies of the country. From February 15<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008, IGRMS, Bhopal organized a successful workshop on ‘wood carving and totem art of the tribes of Manipur’ with the collaboration of Tribal Museum and Research Centre. This museum also has some wooden artifacts in its show case. “Manipur State Museum” is also having some collective wooden objects and other materials of art and crafts of the state. Beside these museums, the “Tribal Research Institute” of Manipur is one who representing the tribal art heritage and material culture of the state (Kamkhengthang, 1985). There are many wooden artifacts preserved in this museum. These objects are all utilitarian in nature and also having different functions in the community.

Since last two decades, the museum authorities have collected these materials through field visits and campaigns in different corners of the state. These museums have some rare & authentic collections of household wooden crafts (Bhowmik, 2015).

### **The following wooden artifacts are the household objects in Manipur:**

This household object is normally used by ‘*Tangkhu*’ tribes of Ukhrul district, locally called ‘*Tokshu*’ (Fig. A). This is a small rectangular wooden grinder used to grind ginger, chili pepper, etc. It has a hole in its handle for the purpose of hanging. The grinding part is hollowed in an oval shape carved inside a rectangular border around the edge.



Figure A. Tokshu



Figure B. Tungkhu

‘*Tungkhu*’ (Fig. B) is a small wooden mortar traditionally made by the craftsmen of *khamasom* village in East Ukhrul district. This wooden artifact is used to grind chili pepper, ginger, etc. It is 9.5 cm. in height and 11 cm. in diameter of the circular mouth with 5.5 cm. round handle. ‘*Tunggkhupi*’ (Fig. C) is a type of wooden dish having four stands with a round base. It is generally used by the *Thangkhul* tribe for having food. It is about 18 cm. in height including stand and 23 cm. in diameter.



Figure C. Tunggkhupi



Figure D. Kaphikhei

‘*Kaphikhei*’ or ‘*Khepiikhe*’ (Fig. D) is a type of wooden bowl on a round base stand used by Mao tribes of Senapati district. It is traditionally used to grind chili, fermented fish, etc. It is at a height of 21 cm. with a 15 cm. base and 21 cm. in diameter.



Figure E. Shingkho



Figure F. Bawn, Mutua Museum, Andro, Imphal east

‘*Shingkho*’ or ‘*theikum*’ (Fig. E) is a type of wooden bowl used by the ‘*Paomei*’ tribes of Senapati district in Manipur. It is especially used as a rice and curry container.

The local name '*Bawm*' (Fig. F) is a type of wooden household object made and used by the *Vaiphei* tribes of Manipur. It is a traditional woodcraft and is used as a carrier with two handles and a wooden cover. A cotton rope is seen attached to the two handles for comfortable carrying and hanging. It can be assumed that the shape and concept behind the use of modern lunch boxes may be influenced by the early traditional food carriers (Rajesh, 2008).

This is a typical cup-shaped wooden grinder with a handle and wooden lid so called '*Katankong*' (Fig. G) in local words. It is particularly used as a container for both grinding and storing of salt and other cooking materials (Rajesh, 1997).



Figure G. Katankong



Figure H. Khongphei, TRI, IMPHAL

'*Khongphei*' (Fig. H) is the local name of a wooden dish with stand and rectangular base which is used to have dinner by the *Liangmei* tribes of Tharon in Tamenglong district. It is sized up in a Height of 11.5 cm. with 37.8 cm. in diameter. It is marked with few engravings which are the special feature of this household object.



Figure I. Pia, TRI, IMPHAL



Figure J. Tamkuaka, TRI, IMPHAL

The local name '*Pia*' (Fig. I) is a kind of wooden mug used by the *Zeme* tribes of Manipur (A sub-tribe of *Kabui*). Traditionally use to drink country brew. A decorated handle made up of cane split is attached for a comfortable handling. It is made in a size of 11.5 cm. in height and 9.8 cm. in diameter.

'*Tamkuaka*' (Fig. J) is the local name of a small wooden craft. It can be called a miniature size of carrying basket. It is the imitation of bigger bamboo baskets. In this aspect, the bamboo baskets are used for carrying materials from place to place and the wooden one is used as a household object. Now-a-days these smaller sizes bamboo baskets are also available in markets.



Figure K. Thingsum & Sylung, TRI, IMPHAL



Figure L. Buffalo horn, MUTUA MUSEUM, Imphal

‘*Thingsum & Sylung*’ (Fig. K) is the local name of a small size mortar used for pasting and grinding raw materials. It is traditionally used by the *Thangkhul* tribes of Bishnupur. They used a small rounded end stone log or pestle instead of wooden pestles.

This wooden replica of a buffalo horn (Fig. L) is beautifully carved and shaped by the artisans belongs to *Mao* tribes of Manipur. It contains engravings of floral motifs in six hexagonal shapes. The *Mao* tribes used to make this unique vessel for distributing wine during different ceremonies.

The following objects are the wooden hammers used to imprint the texture and pattern on earthen pots. These tools contain engravings of some textile designs, local floral motifs, and geometrical shapes. Following a systematic process, the artisans make several hammers with the engravings of different designs. The artisans take the impression of different designs on the surface of the pots by gently beating. Locally, these tools are called as ‘Peta’ or ‘Phujei’ or ‘Zah’ or ‘Khoting’ (Maskell, 1911). These tools are found in different size and shapes. The ‘Peta’ (Fig. M) containing designs are particularly used to imprint design on the surface of the pots and the Peta without the engravings of design are used to give round shape of a pot.

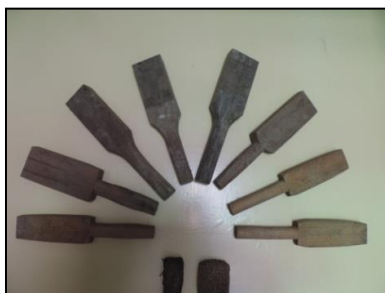


Figure M. Peta, Tribal Museum & Research Centre, IMPHAL



Figure N. Tunshupi, Tribal Research Institute, IMPHAL

‘*Tunshupi*’ (Fig. N) is a type of wooden dish with a decorative base stand traditionally used among the *Thangkhul* tribes from the Ukhrul district of Manipur. It is very interesting to observe that the *Tunshupi* is a particular wooden dish adjoining three wooden dishes systematically. Among the three dishes, one is a big bowl used to keep rice, and two other small bowls used for

curry. It is also seen that the joined edge of the two bowls contains a carving of two face-to-face birds' head.



Figure O.Tokshu or Tongkhu, TRI, IMPHAL.

*Tokshu / Tongkhu* is a type of traditional wooden mixture grinder used by the *Thangkhul* tribes of Ukhrul district in Manipur. It is traditionally carved with one handle and in different sizes.

## Conclusion

Material culture has always been a part of social activities whether it is used for ritual purposes or religious or as a daily use utensil. The functions of these objects are not only a part of a community or as a household object. It's becoming a part of globalization where every religion, community and society gets benefits of it. The persons or groups that are using modern household materials in the present day are the transformations of earlier invaluable wooden items. Only a few people are aware of this fact. In the present day, these wooden objects have now become showcase items of museums in Manipur. It is most acceptable that the uses of wooden artifacts have been changed gradually due to available metal and plastic products in the markets (Bhargava, 2008). Change is the nature of society which may develop the society into the next stage of development. The development of society, culture, and the existence of human beings mostly depends on change. This changing nature can be defined in many directions such as dress patterns, food habits, daily uses objects, ceremonies, thoughts, concepts and ideas of individuals and through the groups of a particular community. The ethnic people are also influenced by new mediums and daily uses of objects. For that reason, the uses and popularity of wooden objects have been reduced among tribal communities of Manipur. In some cases, the objects made by different communities have few similarities in making, local names and uses of motifs and designs. Now the pattern, idea, style, and technique have changed and as a result, these traditional wood crafts are converted into a new shape, form, design, and medium in the course of time. The museums of Manipur are the only initiators who promote the essence of these traditional items for the new generations and society. No doubt, the museums are working nicely for the documentation, dissemination, preservation and utilisation of those traditional art and craft materials of Manipur. Now the question is how can we imply those items in present days? It may be possible by recalling the practice under the government and non-government agencies where a group of craftsmen will be appointed who will be the master artisan in making of these traditional wooden objects. They may guide the interested persons and crafts centres from different corners of the state with the introduction of modern tools and techniques.

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