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ORAL TRADITIONS OF THE DIMASAS IN ASSAM: ANALYSIS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF COWRIE SHELL

Abstract

Oral traditions the integral part of Tribal cultural heritage. Throughout generations it is transmitted among them. It is intimately associated with their socialization process. The Dimasa are dwelling in the states of Assam and Nagaland. They have a number of mythical beliefs and stories passed on throughout generations, mostly by oral traditions. Ranging from the story behind the origin of human beings to those reigning of the Dimasa kings, from the connection with characters of the Mahabharata to the stories of the Dimasa common man, and so on, there has been an interesting series of folktales and legends among them. These bear immensely important symbolic meaning in the cultural tradition of the Dimasa. In this regard, Cowrie shells used to play a very significant symbolic role in the daily livelihood activities of the Dimasa. To interpret this fact a ritual 'Shamanaiba' is analysed in which the Cowrie shells play a very significant role to predict or foretell any social problems in life. They were used in medium of exchange, amulets and as well as a medicine.

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

Keywords: *Myths, Legends, Oral tradition, Shamanaiiba, hoja, beads.*

Concept of Myths, Legends and Folktales

Quoting Simpson and Roud (2000:254), myths are 'stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system ; they are revered as true and sacred ; they are endorsed by rulers and priests ; and closely linked to religion. Once this link is broken, and the actors in the story are not regarded as gods but as human heroes, giants or fairies, it is no longer a myth but a folktale. When the central actor is divine but the story is trivial....the result is religious legend, not myth.'

According to Bascom, (1981:98) 'myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past.' Therefore, one can relate myths to those stories based on traditions, which are believed to be true to those who tell and hear it. The deep meaning behind a myth enables it to survive for a really long period of time.

It can be said that myths are the solutions given by men, to problems of origin in the past, which later came to be solved by science through inductive reasoning. According to Acharya (1987:29) '...myths speak about the creation of man, of animal, of the world, why a certain animal has its characteristics, why and how certain natural phenomena occurred, and how rituals and ceremonies originated. They are accepted on faith and taught to be believed.'

According to Anderson (1895:7), legends have been distinguished from myths like, 'legends, on the other hand, has of necessity, some historical or topographical connection. It refers imaginary events to some real personage, or it localizes romantic stories in some definite spot.' According to Bascom (1981:98) 'legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audiences, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today.' They tell of migrations and deeds of past heroes as well as local tales of buried treasures, ghosts and fairies etc. Though they are believed in as facts and may contain a certain element of historical truth, they cannot be treated as an accurate account of historical events. The ideas can be faulty in its extreme form but appears as the nearest to the right way of looking at the matter. Thus, one can say that legends are generally used as a source to provide historical information about a particular culture or civilization.

Again, folktales are tales or fables, passed on from one generation to another, generally whose authors are unknown. They 'are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction' (Bascom, 1981: 97). There may be many versions of the same folktale, which may also sometimes be regarded as partial truth, in course of time of their passage'. Unlike myths and legends, folktales can be regarded as timeless and placeless and may be set in any time and at any place. Folktales usually recount the adventures of animal and human characteristics and can be categorized in many ways, such as, human tales,

animal tales, trickster tales, jokes and humorous tales and moral tales etc. The important characteristic of folktale is the traditional nature of the material. It is handed down from the father to the son or from one person to another as it is remembered from generation to generation by word of mouth. In the folktales of many communities, they have conventional opening and closing formula, such as ‘once upon a time...’ and ‘...lived happily ever after’ (Chakroborty, 2000:166).

It is actually difficult to classify myths, legends and folktales into separate categories owing to the fact that they often overlap over one another. Earlier, it was taught that myths were stories devised to explain or to accompany rituals, but although the evidence suggests that the theory does not account for the origin of all myths, whose genesis remains a matter of speculation. In the last century, it was popular to think of myths as no more than naive attempts to explain the existence of natural phenomenon (Savill, 1977:16).

According to Acharya (1987:32), the three can be differentiated in the following manner-

FORM	BELIEF	TIME	PLACE	ATTITUDE	PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS
Myth	Fact	Remote past	Different world: Other or earlier	Sacred	Non-human
Legend	Fact	Recent past	World of today	Secular or sacred	Human
Folktale	Fiction	Anytime	Any place	Secular	Human or non- human

Often in such oral traditions, certain material cultural implements are treated with very special resemblance. One such implement are the beads. A bead can be regarded as a tiny, ornamental object that is used to pierce with a small hole through a specialized thread or flexible wire and the sizes of a bead are generally ranges from 1 mm (0.039 in) to over 1 cm (0.39 in) in diameter (Chowdhury,1991:228) . Beads are minute, attractive and colourful frequently standardized in expensive and often quite beautiful which can be worn as necklaces as ornaments that can be arranged in continual pattern, known to be universal and one of the oldest appearance of human behavioural tradition i.e., from the time immemorial usage of bead is a common mode of ornamentation of the people Regarding materials, beads are of different varieties such as ivory, animal teeth, shell, wood, stone, clay, mineral, glass etc. of different shape, size and colour. Ancient beads of different time period are still visible as beaded ornaments among different tribes mostly in Asian part of regions in their social life (Francis, 1982:1-3).

Beads have been the tiniest artefacts that human ever had as antique in their cultural and historic context. The study on beads has occupied a long journey as an interdisciplinary field with its own intend and technique (Francis,

1987:7). In India traditional beaded necklaces used by the tribal hierarchy with their material usage and techniques of making have undoubtedly attract and helpful to archaeologists and ethnographers in order to interpret material set-up and human interference in the life pattern of a society (Deo, 2000:14). In any society, a bead becomes futile or meaningless object if there is no personal consciousness (Bednarik,1998:51). The findings of excavated beads from Harappa which was analyzed on the basis of ranking on raw material and technology i.e. the terracotta and bone beads made from simple technology and material locally available were regarded as the lowest rank. On the other hand, shell, unfired steatite, stone beads made from exotic raw material with relatively simple technologies were of middle rank and beads made of fired steatite, faience, carnelian, copper, gold with complex technologies were of the highest rank. Likewise, the ranks were also given to this bead makers or artisans (Kenoyer,1991:84-5).In ancient time beads were interpreted and utilized in social respects as well as religious matter (Dubin,1987:9). Beads are a valuable object which reveals and help to reconstruct the cultural history of a society (Deo 2000: 1), which has its own symbolic interpretation.

Anthropologists explore the symbolic meanings of an objects and action which is attached to different cultural behaviour through its own observation and techniques (Rosman et al. 1995:105). One of the symbolic object Cowrie shell was a main accumulation in Maldive Island in Indian Ocean which was traded in early times to Southeast Asia and beyond. It is clear from the earlier research that the Cowrie shells means to valuable object (Campbell, 2003:43). It is interesting to know that far beyond the sea shore in different parts of the world the two types of Cowrie shells - *Cypraeamoneta* and *Cyparea annulus* plays a significant role as a symbol of wealth, medium of exchange and religious accessory since time immemorial (Bhattacharjee,1983:26). Towards the 19th century these marine Cowrie shells were traded from Indian Ocean by some traders to the tribes of Northeast India having its monetary as well as symbolic functional value (Campbell, 2003:64). It is evident from the archaeological research that the Dimasa tribe of Assam uses Cowrie shell as a significant value (Chowdhury, 1991:76).

A Brief Note on the Dimasa

The Dimasa are regarded as one of the autochthonous communities who are dwelling in the Northeastern region of India. They are mostly settled in the two hills districts of Assam that is, DimaHasao and KarbiAnglong as well as inthe neighbouring district of Nagaon, Hojai in Assam. They are patriarchal in nature and follow the patrilineal rule of descent respectively. Every Dimasa people observe the rites and rituals in their socio- religious life under the guidance of village priest called as '*Hoja*'. Moerover, the whole Dimasa population is the believer of 12 religious areas or territorial jurisdiction called as '*Daikho*' in which the God and Goddesses reside in that particular '*Daikho*'

to protect them and control their destiny (Bordoloi, 1984:12). The Dimasas propitiate a number of benevolent spirits; they also believe in malevolent or evil spirits who have to be appeased in order to prevent themselves from falling under their wrath of harm (Danda, 1978:7). The Dimasas had their ancient capitals at Dimapur, Maibang and Khaspur each of which still bears significant archaeological ruins, proving of the rich architectural and royal grandeur of this group of people (Barua, 1980:2).

Objectives: The main objective of the paper is-

- 1) To know about the popular myths and legends of the Dimasas.
- 2) To know in detail about the significance of cowrie shell in certain rituals, as noticed among the Dimasas.
- 3) To find out, whether such oral tradition had any significant role in their traditional way of healing.

Methodology

The paper is mainly based on primary data. In this regard, a field work was conducted from January 2019 to December 2019 in Dhansiri village of Karbi Anglong district. The said village is the mono-ethnic village; whereas it is oldest and biggest settlement of the Dimasa Tribal group in Karbi Anglong district, with total 379 families. The study was done on all the families, to know about their ideas and knowledge related to myth, legend, folktales across generations. Interviews were taken on the folk performers and traditional healers, who had adequate knowledge and practices of such oral traditions, with an approach of community benefit and preservation of such cultural traditions. As most of the Dimasa oral narratives lack proper documentation, it was necessary to have a face-to-face conversation with the resource persons, who were mostly elderly persons, so that the required data on the pristine myths, legends and folktales could be properly collected.

Findings and Discussion

A) Popular Myths, Legends and Folktales

The Dimasa have a rich amalgamation of ancient myths, legends, folktales, ballads and fables, which speak boldly of their culture, traditions and the royal legacy they bear since the time of their glorious rulers. In this paper, as already mentioned, attempt has been made to highlight some of the popular myths, legends and folktales mainly regarding the high persons, Gods and Goddesses, kings and queens, and common personalities. Although the three prose narratives myths, legends and folktales are used ambiguously, yet based on it, those are discussed as follows:

- 1) ***Arikkhidima***: This story narrates the origin of the Dimasa; it is believed that at the beginning of the creation of the earth, an island in the sea was under the jurisdiction of one King who lived with his consort, named as *Arikkhidima*, a divine bird. The latter wanted to create human beings in the world, therefore, after a divine conception, along with her husband, they searched for the suitable place and settled at a beautiful one, at the confluence of two rivers, namely, *Dilaobra* and *Sangibra*. Here, *Arikkhidima* laid seven eggs, of which the first six hatched and were named as *Sibarai*, *Du Raja*, *Naikhu Raja*, *Wa Raja*, *Gunyang Braiyung* and *Hamiadao* respectively. They became the six Deities of the Dimasas who are also known as their ancestors. However, the seventh egg did not hatch leading to the youngest Deity *Hamiadao* to forcefully break it open and eventually outlet a plethora of evil spirits. These evil spirits are considered to be the main reasons behind all the disharmony, sickness, diseases, natural calamities and mishaps. *Sibarai*, the eldest son is regarded as all-in-all by the Dimasas, as He is believed to guard them from the wrath and harmful works of the evil spirits.

On the basis of such legends, the Dimasas worship their different Deities, for their familial and territorial well being. *Arikkhidima*'s story not only talks of the origin of man on earth, but also about the religious life of the Dimasa people.

- 2) ***Dishru/Disrik***: There is a very popular legend among the Dimasas, regarding a princess named as *Dishru*. A mighty Dimasa king had long desire of a son, as it was prophesized that if a son was born to him, his kingdom would flourish and if it was a daughter, then, it would bring a downfall to the kingdom. After ordering his queen and ministers to monitor over the birth, if it was a son, to take special care and to kill if a daughter would be born. The king left for a battle in another land for thirteen years. Alas, a daughter was born and that being a very beautiful one, which made the queen and the ministers totally reluctant to kill her. Therefore, the daughter was secretly brought up in the absence of the king. She was named as *Dishru*; she grew up to become an even more beautiful maiden. On the return of the king after thirteen years, he happened to see *Dishru* and instantly fell for her beauty, without having the least clue that she was none other than his own daughter. The king declared that he would marry *Dishru*, which shocked the queen and the ministers. The queen was left with no other option but to tell him the truth about *Dishru*. This came as an utter shock as disgrace to the king. As he was lamenting over the blunder he committed, *Dishru* left the kingdom to some other place, far away from such a huge shame. The king realized his mistake and sent his ministers to go, look for *Dishru* and bring her back to the

kingdom as the princess, as he was utterly guilty for his blunder. However, the ministers had some other intentions – they knew that if they brought back *Dishru*, she would be made the heir to the kingdom, which went against their desires to grab the power of the empire. Therefore, they went to search for *Dishru*, but on finding her, they conveyed her the wrong message saying that the king has ordered her to choose any of the two conditions: first, to return back to the kingdom and marry the king, or secondly, to never return back to the kingdom or keep any ties, again. Hearing this, the already saddened *Dishru*, was completely disheartened and promised never to return back to the kingdom.

On her way, *Dishru* met a few Dimasa men and as she lost track of her path, she asked them the way. However, much to her dismay, they didn't show her the path. Further ahead, she met a few Manipuri people, who showed her the path very promptly. Immediately, *Dishru* cursed upon the Dimasa people, that owing to her disgrace because of her beauty, let all the beauty go away from the Dimasa girls to the Manipuri girls. This curse is still believed to be true among the Dimasa people.

This legend is very significant in the customary judiciary of the Dimasas. Any extra marital adultery practices, incest relation in between patrilineal and matrilineal clan are strictly prohibited among them. It generates a period-based plot during the Dimasa rule and contemporary Ahom, Manipuri and Naga rulers. A few theatre groups have been conducting plays on *Dishru* and earning huge laurels for spreading this legend to the world. A recent one was staged at Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra on 27th December 2019.

- 3) ***Snemduri***: A very known tragic legend or rather a fable, goes about a beloved sister of seven strong brothers. The name of the girl was *Snemduri*, who knew the art of weaving beautiful clothes with expertise. As her brothers were very protective, they would never leave her alone. There was a giant demon, who would always seek for an opportunity, with the help of his witch sister, to capture *Snemduri*, as he wanted to marry her.

One day, *Snemduri*'s brothers decided to go out to the forest to get the raw materials of her weaving loom. As she would be alone in the hut, the brothers locked her behind seven strong gates inside the hut and carefully asked her not to open the gates for anybody other than them. The demon and his sister had however heard all the conversation of *Snemduri* and her brothers. The witch sister called out *Snemduri*'s name aloud in the voice of one of her brothers to which the innocent girl thought to be really her brother. She immediately opened the

gates and the demon entered inside shutting down all the seven gates. Finally, when the seven brothers arrived and called out for *Snemduri*, there was no response. They couldn't open the gates either and thought that their beloved sister died. In this depression, all the seven brothers committed suicide by making a big dump with what they had collected from the forest, setting it on fire and jumping into it.

Meanwhile, the demon was enthralled at the death of the seven brothers, before he could do any harm to *Snemduri*, she asked him to fetch some water from a river with a leaky bamboo pot. The demon agreed and while he went to collect the water, *Snemduri* dressed herself with the best of the lot, put the husker in her position with another of her dress, jumped into the fire in the courtyard and met her death.

Based on such legends, the Dimasas follow a very strong bondage in between siblings and kindered group.

- 4) ***Hidimba***: There is a legend by which the Dimasas are traced of their origin from the Mahabharat figure, *Ghatotkach*. During the exile of the *Pandav* brothers in a forest, the *Pandav* prince *Bhim* came across a demoness named *Hidimba* and her demon brother *Hidimb*. As the sister-brother duo tried to make *Bhim* fall into their trap, instead *Hidimba* ends up falling in love with the prince and ask him to marry her. After a thorough consent from Kunti, the mother of the *Pandavs*, *Bhim* and *Hidimba* are married and *Ghatotkach* is born to them, who has a short yet major role to play in the Mahabharat battle. The Dimasa are said to be the descendants of *Ghatotkach*. In fact, many believe that the word 'Dimasa' has been derived from the name '*Hidimba*' or '*Hirimba*'.
- 5) ***Phanthao Raja***: According to this legend, there was a lady who had six sons. The lady would prepare food and curry from her own kitchen garden, for her sons and herself. One day, when she plucked vegetables, there were some excreta of a python deposited on the vegetable. The lady had no other option but to cook it along with the excreta. After cooking and serving the food, the sons were amazed at the great taste of the curry and thought that the meat of the python would be more delicious. Therefore, the six brothers went out to look for the python. On the way, they met an old lady who told them to fetch water in a bamboo basket called '*dikhang*', the success of which would enable them to find and kill the snake. The brothers followed her instructions but failed.

Meanwhile, when the mother of the six brothers was plucking a brinjal from her garden, one of its thorns cut her finger and she conceived a son. Therefore, she named him *Phanthao Raja*, as '*phanthao*' in Dimasa means brinjal. *Phanthao Raja* grew up hearing about his six brothers'

expedition for the *python*; he too decided to look for the python and kill it. Despite, the already anxious mother, *Phanthao Raja* left in search of his brothers and to kill the python. He again came across the same old lady who gave him the same task of collecting water from the bamboo basket. Witty as he was, *Phanthao Raja* succeeded in doing the said task and therefore met the snake which was a huge and long one. He killed the python and out of its stomach came out his six brothers, all unconscious. They woke up and seeing the dead snake, claimed that they had killed it and had been asleep all the time.

The six brothers did not listen when *Phanthao Raja* informed them that he was their youngest brother who had saved them from the snake, by killing it and setting them free. Instead, they took away the whole flesh of the python and refused to give any share to *Phanthao Raja*. This enraged the youngest brother and he cursed all of them saying that they all shall turn into reptiles like lizard and chameleon. This immediately came true, followed by the short demise of their mother, out of depression and dismay.

By following this tradition, the Dimasas consider the reptile groups as tabooed animals and never start up any auspicious ceremony if they are watched.

- 6) ***Asampha***: The humorous tales of *Asampha* are very popular among the Dimasas. *Asampha* is the name of a foolish Dimasa man, who causes a lot of chaos and problem due to his foolishness. One of the popular tale goes as follows: *Asampha's* wife just bore a baby and the mother-son duo were laying on the bed under blankets. *Asampha* could not recognize his own baby and was scared to even go near him, despite his wife's constant convincing. He was sitting on top of the wooden log supporting the hut, immediately above the bed, staring at his own baby. Finally, when he was convinced, he jumped down directly from the wooden log to the bed over the newborn baby, with a heavy thud, killing the poor baby. This led to a great hue and cry all over the village and the wife of *Asampha* screamed out in agony. The villagers blamed *Asampha* for his foolishness and carelessness. They were very sorry for the wife for having been cursed with the fate of having as foolish a man, as her husband.

The Dimasas generally bury the corpse of a baby instead of cremating it. So, as supposed to, *Asampha* rolled his demised baby inside a mat and carrying it over his shoulders, started on his way to the place of burying. Foolish as he was, he unknowingly slipped off his own baby from the mat, on the way. After burying the mat alone, he returned back home. On the way, he came across the corpse of a baby, which was none other than his own. He stopped and looking over the

baby's corpse, proudly exclaimed, 'It is not just mine, but also other man's babies who die.' Saying this, he laughed out loudly and returned home happily. Even at present, when any person acts foolishly, he is mockingly called '*Asampha*' by the Dimasa people.

- 7) ***Amaluh–Dimaluh and Longlabdao***: The story of *Amaluh-Dimaluh* and *Longlabdao* is based on love and treachery. *Longlabdao* belonged to the royal Hasnusa clan and was well-known for his valour in climbing hills and sloppy terrains. As a child, he was very fond of two girls namely *Amaluh* and *Dimaluh*, who grew up to be witches with extraordinary powers. The childhood affection between *Longlabdao* and the two witches grew into youthful love; however, since the witches were outside the forty male and forty-two female clans, marriage was not possible between them; also *Longlabdao's* mother was in hunt of a suitable bride from a respectable clan.

Sensing the situation, the witch sisters planned to trap *Longlabdao*; they lured him to accompany them to a deep forest, asked him to climb a *champa* tree and pluck flowers for their hair. Trapped in their sweet words, *Longlabdao* with all his sincerity did as asked. However, as he was plucking the flowers, the witches charmed the tree to gradually eat up *Longlabdao's* body. Having realized it, *Longlabdao* appealed them to inform his parents about the whole matter. The sisters agreed and called his parents, who, thereafter, came with a host of men to pray to the witches. The men began cutting the tree but it was too late; by the time it was done, everything of *Longlabdao's* body had already been devoured by the tree, except his tuft of hair. One of the sisters, *Amaluh*, disappeared in fear of punishment, while the body of *Dimaluh* was found dead below the tree. The later had committed suicide, as she was truly in love with *Longlabdao*.

The said legend reflects the significance of the forty male and forty-two female clans in the Dimasa society.

- 8) ***Johaya***: According to this legend, *Johaya* was a young and handsome man who lived in the village named as *Delom Bathari*, near Gunjung of DimaHasao. He had a special skill with playing drums, catching fishes and singing. Therefore, he was sought after the laziest man of his village. However, he had to leave his village for another far-off village named Bosora due to the newly introduced conscription policy of the British. His life at Bosora was however worse– he was infested by mosquitoes, leeches and also bore a harsh climate. He could never return back to his original village. The story of *Johaya* had been narrated in the form of a ballad with a tinge of sadness.
- 9) ***Harifa and Dumaidi***: The story of *Harifa* is another legend based on love between two individuals. He was a young trader of a place called

Lamsakhang of Karbi Anglong district. He had come to Dima Hasao district (then, North Cachar Hills), through the river *Diyung*, in order to sell his commodities at the market. As he rowed his boat upstream, he saw a young girl named as *Dumaidion* the banks of the river, who fell in love with *Harifa*, by seeing his charm. *Dumaidi* followed and asked him to marry her. She took him home, for the consent of her family. However, *Harifa* was humiliated and insulted by all her seven brothers and ageing mother. Therefore, he left for his land; but as he was rowing his boat downstream, *Dumaidi* stopped him and pleaded to take her with him. Initially, *Haifa* declined her proposal; but finally, he agreed, took her along, and lived happily together.

Thus, having narrated the nine popular myths, legends and folktales, most of which are transmitted to the next generation through oral narratives in the form of ballads, there are a few implications which each one of them generate – either in social, religious, economic, historical and other aspects of the Dimasa society.

B) Significance of Cowrie Shells

1) Cowrie shell as bead

Cowrie shell '*Khauthi*' is a marine object with a size of 1 cm. Among the Dimasas, '*Khauthi*' is valued as a very precious object and belief to be God of ocean or sea. It has a deep significance as beads especially for babies and are used to make amulet named as, '*Jingsdu*' in which one or three Cowrie shells are strung with black cotton thread along with three circular and one rectangular shaped black colour glass beads (Plate-1). It is tied around the waist of a baby in belief as a symbol to eradicate the evil eye or evil spirit '*SagainMadai*'. According to religious belief among the Dimasas, when the evil eye tried to harm or attack the baby, they return back by looking the Cowrie shell tied around the waist of a baby that there is a Deity of Ocean.

2) Cowrie shells in Shamanaiba ritual

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

'*Hoja*' early in the morning in an empty stomach facing towards the direction of sunrise. Most of the rituals among the Dimasa community are foretold by the priest '*Hoja*' through ritual '*Shamanaiba*'. The material needed to perform '*Shamanaiba*' ritual is sacred machete called as '*Sheng*', 4 cowrie shells '*Khauthi*', basil leaf or '*Tulsi*' to sprinkle the holly water.

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

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

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

Photographs

Plate-1: Cowrie shell 'Khauthi' as amulet 'Jingsdu'



Plate-2: Male Priest performing 'Shamanaiba' ritual



Plate-3: Different varieties of Cowrie shells '*Khauthi*'

Concluding remarks

Among many tales and folk beliefs of the Dimasas, the above discussed ones are the more popular ones. These are myths or legends, which are believed to be true as they are narrated to ascertain their significance in the Dimasa culture and tradition. The myths and legends of the Dimasas enable to ascertain the kind of socio-religious significance that they bear in the society, as well as define their origin. It is difficult to place each of these popular Dimasa folk narratives under one particular category, as myths, legends and folktales overlap each other. There are rarely any books written on the rich Dimasa narratives on folktales, ballads, myths and legends. It is the need of the hour to collect and record as many folk narratives as possible of the Dimasa community and be preserved in writing.

It is obvious from the above that Cowrie shells '*Khauthi*' are associated with sacred object in ritualistic life of the Dimasa people. From the historical evidence it is clear that the Cowrie shells '*Khauthi*' were traded since time immemorial. Society and culture are always dynamic in nature. However, among the Dimasas of Karbi Anglong, the use Cowrie shells '*Khauthi*' is still immensely important. This material cultural object is an integral part of their oral tradition and oral healing. The concerned people are very much psychologically depended on their traditional healers and traditional priests. They strongly believe that, to maintain social discipline, familial peace, for good health, oral traditional practices are the only way, as it is blessed by their different Deities and ancestral spirits. It is to be mentioned here that, in the Karbi Anglong districts, the Dimasas are dwelling with several other Tribal groups like the numerical dominant Karbis, Bodos, Kukis, Rengma Nagas, Hmars, Garos. On the other hand, the Dhansiri area of Karbi Anglong is the hinterland with Nagaland. Often there used to be certain undocumented

territorial issues in between them. It has been found that, the studied Dimasa people feel very prestigious in practising their cultural traditions and oral traditions. Among the concerned Dimasapeople including the young generations, it is strongly believed that, only by adhering to own cultural practices and age old oral traditions, they can keep their ethnic identity unique and specific from the other ethnic groups dwelling in their surroundings.

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