

BAMBOO BASKET OF KABUI: TECHNO-FUNCTIONAL, SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCES

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Abstract: In the light of the Binfordian theoretical perspective of material culture, the present paper aims to understand the three dimensions of carrying bamboo basket of Kabui (the Kabui are also called Rongmei) tribe of Manipur, viz. a) utilitarian, that is, instrumental linked to its function (technomic), b) social (sociotechnic) and c) ideational relating to symbolism and social meaning (ideotechnic) of the appliance. Carrying baskets form one of the most diverse bamboo and cane-based crafts. The Kabuis of Manipur (especially the hill dwellers) produce some of the finest carrying baskets (*Ka*) with variation in design, size, shape and types of weave, which can be consociated with people's perceptions of the environment, modes of economic interaction, and division of labour, particularly by gender. The technological significance of Kabui carrying baskets entails their weave patterns like wickerwork, cross weft, and diagonal or twilled, where significant relations of the pattern and design with age and sex of the carrier or user are observed.

Introduction

Bamboo products play an important role in the society of Manipur. By adopting the Binfordian theoretical perspective observing the various dimensions of material culture, this paper has attempted to portray the utility, symbolic and cultural importance of carrying a basket of the Kabui tribe made out of bamboo. Bamboo is abundantly available in the state of Manipur, one of the Northeastern states of India. Bamboo functions as a tree-like activity in a forest ecosystem. Bamboo is a collective term used for different kinds of grass

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woody plants. The characteristics of mature bamboo vary considerably from species to species. It can be used in one piece as well as split, or flattened into sheets for fencing, building a house and for many other structural applications. Splits of various sizes can be obtained and can even be twisted to form ropes. Moreover, bamboo shoot is used even for consumption in different traditional cuisines in raw or fermented this region. Thus, bamboo serves tremendous facets of use in every day as well as long-term purposes in the different livelihoods of the people of the country in general and of this region in particular. Kurz (1876), a forester wrote, 'no plant is known in the tropical zone which could supply to man so many technical advantages as the bamboo - without the bamboo, the Indian would be poor, very poor indeed.' Further, Burkhill (1935) stated, 'Bamboos in the east have a collective value so much beyond all estimation, that it is a little surprising how slowly they made an impression in the west.'

The state of Manipur is well known for its bamboo craft and products throughout the country. The bamboo and cane craft of Manipur have developed over several decades of this century. These craft practices are the gift of several tribes of the state, of which mention may be made of Maring, Kabui, Maram, Tangkhul, and different Kuki tribes. Multiple bamboo products with a varied range of techniques, forms, structures, functions and aesthetic appreciation can be seen even among the different sub-tribe of the state. Carrying baskets made of bamboo has occupied a significant place socially and economically. Keeping this view in mind, this paper brings up ample light specifically on the socio-economic position and cultural-symbolic interpretation of the carrying basket (of carrying thing) for the Kabui tribe of Manipur.

Objectives of the Study: The present study deals with the Bamboo basket of the Kabui tribe of Manipur. To explore more insight, it is emphasized with the following objectives.

- (i) To make an in-depth enquiry into the Utilitarian-socio-ideational set-up relating to the bamboo basket of Kabui.
- (ii) To describe the significance of different baskets used by different aged groups and sex reflected in the lifeways of Kabui society.

Materials and Methods: The present study is based on the data from both the primary and secondary sources from different field sites situated in different geo-ecological settings covering both Hills and valley districts of Manipur State. The relevant data of the study have been collected employing the methods and techniques of ethnographic research. A preliminary survey was done (pilot site survey) by employing standard techniques of ethnographic data collection, such as key informant and unstructured interview, participant and non-participant observation.

The Kabui

The Kabui are one of the indigenous tribes of Manipur mainly residing in the western hill and valley of the state. They are agriculturists, hunter-gatherers, and practice fishing for a subsistence economy. They also inhabit in the neighbouring state of Nagaland and Assam. The Kabuis belong to mongoloid stock racially and speak the Tibeto-Burman language. The Kabuis' are well known for making bamboo products. They are experts in making different crafts such as baskets, bamboo stools, bamboo chairs, bamboo granaries, bamboo huts, and so on. The bamboo basket has multiple purposes of carrying as well as measuring and storing particularly for grain, cloths, vegetables, etc. The basket is one of the abundant elements found within the Kabui society. Every family has at least one basket and serves different purposes. Not everyone makes this implement; but an artefact made by male specialists, where only a few people know how to make it. The one who got the training and has the skill makes the products and supplies the items among the family kin and peer group or for selling them in the market.

In connection with transmitting skills for making bamboo products or any traditional knowledge, the dormitory plays a significant role in Kabui society. The younger male learns the making of implements, particularly bamboo products, from the boys' dormitory (*Khangchu*). *Khangchu* is a social institution, gathering under a specified house, where younger boys are exposed to or impart various cultural traditional skills or training through socialization. This dormitory provides an important space and room for interaction among the peer groups under the guidance ship of the dormitory seniors. According to Makuga (1994, 23) 'the young boys are to train and learn all kinds of games and sports, song, i. e. singing, playing the drums, blowing horns, traditional art forms, wrestling, spear and javelin throws, fighting, wood cutting, wood carving, carpentry, basket making and so on from the dormitory house.' The boys receive basketry training in the dormitory, usually at nightfall after returning from the paddy field or work. All the basketry trainees bring their own required materials from their respective homes; the expert elders and trainees sit together around the fire in a friendly environment during the training session. They use a dormitory (*Khangchu*) corridor or courtyard in the daytime when there is no daytime work, especially during the post-harvest season. The trainees consider the post-harvesting season as the best time to make any kind of bamboo and cane work. One of the elders' houses is also considered another alternative place to perform basketry with equal importance.

The making of carrying baskets, and its training in the dormitory play a major role in the skill development of the younger generation among the Kabui tribe. The basket which we are dealing with in this discussion is made of bamboo and cane that are locally available. There are various types of carrying baskets among Kabui. Some of the common types of the basket are (in local dialect), 1. *Ka:-Thingrem Ka*, and *Laokum Ka*, (fig. 2) 2. *Kalong: -Maipui*

Kalong, and *Tuna Kalong* (fig. 3), 3. *Kbuk* (fig. 4), 4. *Senpai* (fig. 5). Apart from basket mention may be made of some other carrying implements such as *Pam Hantbai*, *Hantong and Hanlun* (fig. 6), and *Potru* or *Peenam*.

Since it is noted the socio-cultural and economic relationship between environmental resources and human culture, knowledge or technology of the people of the area, it is necessary to understand the technology, and materials to depict some basic elements of the socio-cultural life of the people as a way forward to understand the relationship between people and utilization of resources. The need for undergoing an in-depth detailed



Figure 1: *Kabui (Rongmei) woman carrying Ka basket*



Figure 2: *Ka (a) Thingrem Ka (b) Lookum Ka*



Figure 3: *Kalon*: a) *Meipui Kalong*,
b) *Tuna Kalong*



Figure 4: *Khuk* Basket



Figure 5: *Senpai* Basket

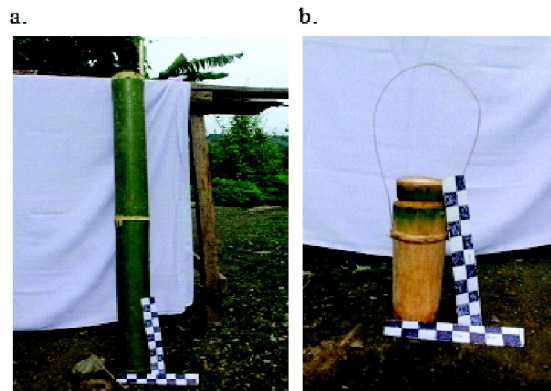


Figure 6 a): *Hanlun* or *Harriang*,
b) *Hanhai* or *Haniong*

study of technology and material is very much justified in the study of human society and its cultural life. In some of the studies, technology and material culture were studied in single-dimensional i.e the utilitarian only. A step toward recognizing the multidimensional condition of material culture was taken in the early work of Binford (1962) in his classic paper - "Archaeology as Anthropology." He initially established a differentiation in the primary objects, proposing the existence of three types of domain: techno-economic, socio-technic, and ideo-technic. Binford (1962) has interpreted the material culture of a society from the perspective of ideology, economic and social life, wherein its brief highlight will bring out the essence of the present discussion and better understand the material culture.

Technomics (utilitarian) signifies those artefacts having their primary functional context in coping directly with the physical environment, variability in the technomic components referred to the ecological frame with such phenomena as extractive efficiency, efficiency in performing bio-compensatory tasks such as heat retention, the nature of available resources, their distribution, density and the loci of availability, i.e. ecological functionalism (Politis, 2007). Sociotechnic (social) signifies the material elements having their primary function context in the social sub-system of the total cultural system. This sub-system functions as the extra-somatic means of articulating individuals one with another to cohesive groups capable of efficiently maintaining themselves and manipulating the technology. The basic form and structure of the socio-technic component of an artifactual assemblage lie in the nature and structure of the social system. Therefore, any change in the sociotechnic component can be related to changes in the structure of the social system which they represent. i.e utilitarian function and symbolic (ibid).

Ideotechnic (ideational) artefact item of this class have their primary functional context in the ideological component of the social system. These are the items, which signify and symbolize the ideological rationalizations for the social system and further provide the symbolic milieu in which individuals are enculturated, a necessity if they are to take their place as functional participants in the social system; referred as the ritual dimension of technical activity (Pfaffenberger, 1992: 501).

These three dimensions of material culture operate together and cannot be separated, even for analytical purposes. Every artefact in society operates simultaneously in these three dimensions, and these should be viewed as a whole domain of technology. On the same note, we are going to view the various carrying baskets of the Kabui tribe from the perspective of these three dimensions.

The Carrying Basket

From the very beginning, carrying baskets made of bamboo are unavoidable in day to day life of the Kabui people relating to many economic activities. Traditionally, there were many handmade bamboo products used by the Kabui people, however, many utilities have been replaced by machine products made of metals and plastics. It is fortunate that some bamboo baskets have not yet been replaced and their utility and importance are still occupying a place in Kabui society. It is always good to encourage the indigenous product in society because it is the most effective mechanism for preserving indigenous knowledge. Such kinds of material culture may also be studied from the ethnoarchaeological perspective in order to reconstruct the past society. In fact, carrying a basket of Kabui people speaks a lot in understanding the polity or economy origin, lifeways, habits and ecology of the society.

There are pieces of evidence that modernization and westernization are also likely to cease many indigenous pieces of knowledge and skills consciously or unconsciously. This is because the indigenous knowledge is not under a written system, not recorded properly, but it has been used and practised through oral tradition. Therefore, it could not face the competition with the products brought by industrialization, modernization, professionalism etc. which are endorsed by a formal written and record system, formal training and education system. It is also not uncommon that the indigenous knowledge of people was plagiarized by the advanced, modernized societies and had been presented in the formally organized platform to claim the original patent. It could be knowledge, technology or any kind of intellectual property that would have been plagiarized, or reproduced without acknowledging the people which became a serious ethical concern these days.

In the eyes of post-modernists, every society has its tradition, symbols, images, and local meanings in a particular knowledge system. There is no knowledge outside of society but developed on its own through language. It indicates the creativity of every society through discourses and rejected the cut-throat authority of modern ethnography. Studying exotic people in a faraway land is no longer defensible because the goal of such activity is no longer legitimate since it marginalized peoples' micro-narratives, their fundamental outlook on human life, experience and indigenous knowledge systems. Socially ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions are the knowledge shared by people with similar backgrounds being acquired through imitation shaping the social actions of the individuals of the society.

Ka—This carrying basket has uniform holes (*Kamit*) all over its body, having a definite diagonal shape formed by the inter-weaving of the bamboo strips. The carrying basket (*Ka*) has a wider opening mouth (*Kachi*) with a close taper base or bottom, which possesses four legs (*Kabeng*) attached to each of the four corners. The Carrying basket (*Ka*) has a carrying strap attached to the basket body from the lower portion up to the opening mouth, called *Peenam or Potru*, which is again divided into two parts. The upper portion of the strap, which is to be attached with the carrier head is flattened and broader being called *Ngumbong*, and the lower strap or rope which is attached with the *Ngumbong* is tubular in shape, called *Peenam Riang*.

This lower strap or rope has two ends that hold the basket at the bottom meeting at one point and passing through two pairs of small nodes called *Kanu* (ear), which help the rope to hold at the desired position. When the same basket is used by male folk, typical shoulder support made of wood is fixed to the carrying basket's strap. This typical wooden piece is called *Gokekhang*. The main body of the basket (*Ka*) is generally weaved by *Duijang Pei* (a bamboo species), known for its durability and flexibility. Cane is spirally weaved around the mouth portion of the basket (*Kachi*) and also cane is used for making nodes or

Kanu (ear), *Peenam* and for binding the leg (*Kabeng*). The leg (*Kabeng*) of the basket (*Ka*) is made of branches of bamboo.

Kalong–This type of carrying basket is woven tightly by plain and twill weave technique. The *Kalong* also has a wider opening mouth (*Kachi*) portion called *Potru* and a close tapering base or bottom called *Potmai*, which possesses four legs (*Kabeng*). The *Kalong* has a carrying strap, called *Peenam*, which also has two parts in it.

The flattened upper portion attached to the carrier head is called *Ngumbong*, and the lower tubular rope that holds the basket at the bottom, *Ngumbong* is called *Peenam Riang*. This *Peenam Riang* passes through two pairs of small nodes called *Kanu* (ear), which help the rope to hold at the desired position. The typical method of using *Gokekhang* by the male is similar to that of the *Ka* basket. The whole body of *Kalong* is weaved by *Duijang Pei* (a bamboo species), while cane are used for weaving mouth opening (*Kachi*), nodes or ear (*Kanu*), *Peenam* and to bind the four legs (*Kabeng*). Cane is used in some part of the basket body for tightening purposes. The legs (*Kabeng*) of the *Kalong* are made of bamboo branches using the bamboo variety called *Sanneipi* (*Bambusa tulda Roxb*).

Khuk–This basket is also a *Kalong*-like structure, made with the same raw materials. The *Khuk* has a lid and uses for storing valuable, primarily clothes or garments, etc. The lid is also made out of the same material and the same weaving design. *Khuk* is a double layer woven for compactness, which has an outer and inside layer. The outside layer is made of *Pei Kaling*, *Kanam* in Kabui (the skin part of bamboo), and the inner layer by the inner portion of the bamboo.

Senpai– *Senpai* is a small carrying basket usually carried around the waist or hanging down from the shoulder. It is being carried while going for a long journey, hunting, fishing and cultivating. Multiple items are carried in *Senpai* such as catapult, *bidi* (small cigar), matches, eatables, etc. This appliance is tied with a carrying belt and has a strap like that of *Ka* and *Kalong Peenam Riang*. This appliance is also made from the same raw material and simple weave or plating technique. Apart from carrying a basket, many other appliances are being used to carry or measure or store things made out of bamboo.

Moreover, bamboo products are serving an important role in satisfying various needs of the people. It can be confidently admitted that bamboo has a great role in the socio-economic significance of the Kabui society even in this contemporary era. It forms a mechanism to restore the skills of the people through generations. Bamboo products are eco-friendly and reduce pollution as compared to plastic products. It is shocking that most of our materials are being replaced by plastics and threatened with a lot of pollution in water bodies, soil and landfills. Bamboo was used in making traditional houses, utensils, and furniture and it is known for its quick renewability since it grows fast to replace itself in the environment.

Procurement of Raw Materials

Raw materials are primarily bamboo and cane of different varieties which are processed according to the desired shape and sizes. Important bamboo types -*Duijangpei*, *Saneipi*, *Pangnu*, *Peideo* and *Panglung* and two cane species *Sangrui* and *Juronrui* (cane species) are used in making different parts of baskets. The suitable bamboo and cane species are collected from the forest or the homestead premises. The best season for cutting down the bamboo plant is during the month of October and January. It is known that the bamboo being cut and collected in the other season has a shorter life and is usually affected by insects limiting the longevity of the bamboo products. Therefore, mature bamboo is preferred as it can be efficiently and effectively split and flattened into sheets for different structural applications. Splits of various sizes can be obtained and can even be twisted. The bamboo is further cut at the bottom and top to obtain a homogeneous size and length and bring to the required length depending on the needed size of the basket and the choice of the maker. Bamboos are trimmed from the inside portion, which is called *Kabung Lapganmei* to remove the fleshy part. The technical reason for removing the fleshy portion of the bamboos split is due to its vulnerability to insect attacks and lessen the life span of the basket. The various size split bamboos are either hung up under the roof (*Kaisoi*) for later use or make it dried in the sun for a few days to use readily. Similarly, the cane is also treated and split into various sizes by trimming the inside portion and hanging up for drying purposes. As a part of the treatment process, traditionally, the materials are usually kept above the kitchen's hearth called *Kaikang*, a good place for seasoning these materials.

Techniques and Process of Making

When it is about to start making the basket, foremost the well-dried and seasoned split bamboo and cane are again required to soak in the water to moisten and soften to regain flexibility. For *Ka* basket rib weave technique which is called *Kanei Goila Kanei Nim* technique is applied. Weaving always starts from the bottom part called *Potmai* and finishes at the upper circular mouth called *Potru*; the *Kachi* (lip) on the *Potru* is again weaved by *Juron* or *Sangrui* cane to hold the split and tighten the weaved bamboo together. Following the making of the body, the *Kabeng* (leg) four legs made of bamboo branches are tightly fitted to the basket by using *Sangrui* or *Juronrui* (a cane variety). It is again followed by making a small node called *Kanu* (ear) for *Peenam Riang* to pass through, which serves as a carrying strap. The four lower corners of the *Potmai* are further stitched by a cane to strengthen the legs, the process being called *Kakun Roumei*. Plain weave is done for *Ngumbong* and *Peenam Riang*. The process of making *Kalong* has also applied a similar method to that of *Ka*, excepting the weaving style. There is no hole on the body in

Kalong basket since the twill and plain i. e. close and tight weave techniques are applied. Male is the exclusive maker of these products and women are the main users of the appliances.

Different Uses

Ka- There are two types of *Ka* based on their uses. One is *Thingrem Ka*, which has a larger hole opening (*Kamit*), generally used for carrying firewood. The collection of firewood is one of the important economic activities of the people. Therefore, every household owns one or more of this type of *Ka* basket. Another is *Laokum Ka*, which has relatively smaller holes opening (*Kamit*) throughout the body, which is used to carry lunch and other eatables while going for cultivation as well as for carrying a different kinds of vegetables whenever necessary. Both these types of the basket are used by young, old, married and unmarried females and males.

Kalong- This is a unisex carrying basket that is interwoven tightly for carrying grains, vegetables, grown or forest products. There are two types of *Kalong*, they are *Meipui* (married women) *Kalong* and *Tuna* (unmarried girl) *Kalong*. *Meipui Kalong* is used by married women, characterized by a simple weaving style with less design in it. This basket is woven by using a plain weaving technique called *Kanei Goila Kanei Nim* (two hooks and two presses). *Tuna Kalong* (unmarried girl) *Kalong* is used by unmarried females. This basket is woven using the twill weave technique and has a specific design on it, to make it more visible to the viewers. While carrying this basket by a female folk, one can identify her marital status. Man folk

Table 1: Different Baskets and their Uses

<i>Item</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Sex Related</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>Thingrem Ka</i>	Larger body hole (<i>Kamit</i>)	Carrying firewood	Male & Female	Mainly used by female
<i>Laokum Ka</i>	Smaller body hole (<i>Kamit</i>)	Carrying vegetables	Male, Female	Mainly used by female
<i>Meipui Kalong</i>	With a smooth weave pattern	Carrying food grain	Married women	Used by Married women
<i>Tuna Kalong</i>	With a visible weave pattern	Carrying food grain	Unmarried girl	Used by Unmarried girl
<i>Khuk</i>	Double layer basket with a lid	Carrying and storing	Male & Female	Used by both sex and gender
<i>Senpai</i>	Bag like basket	Small multi-task carrying basket	Male & Female	Mainly used by Male

can use any of the *Kalong* using shoulder support (*Gokkhang*) whenever they need to carry something. While *Ka* and *Kalong* of various types differ in a morphological features, they serve the same purpose of carrying things efficiently. The person who carries any of these appliances has to bend slightly with the help of *Peenam* or *Potru*. The flattened strap is attached to the carrier head by *Ngumbong* that takes the weight and is supported by the shoulder at the upper portion of the basket (*Potru*), and further, the lower portion of the basket (*Potmai*) rests at the hip of the carrier. These appliances are designed to carry things more efficiently in the hilly area.

Result and Discussion

Artefacts are human products designed with the aim to exploit or confront their social and physical environment in the struggle to survive, procurement of food and protection from various problems. A carrying basket is one such appliance as a product of technology makes to cope with social and physical problems. Technology is one aspect of the social, where different knowledge is used for maximum access to resources around them. Both technical force and social relation are not external but internal (Ingold, 2000; 318). According to Politis (2007; 187), technology is an activity or process, whereas artefacts are the products of that process. Therefore, both the technical and function of the artefacts are coexistent and difficult to understand in isolation (Binford, 1962: 221). This assures that there will be simultaneous growth of culture and technology.

Adaptive efficiency must also be viewed in terms of energy expenditure versus energy conservation (White, 1959: 54). For adaptive efficiency, there must be low energy expenditure in task performance and an increase in energy conservation over a constant energy expenditure in production (Binford, 1962: 221). Throughout the attempt, it is learnt that in the practice of bamboo basketry, with the minimum utilization of naturally available resources, maximum output in the form of technology, energy, skills, and knowledge are explicitly produced and observed.

The energy or technology inherent in the carrying bamboo basket is in a position to portray the different interpretive and symbolic meanings and significances of the people who make and use them. Bamboo and cane are easily available raw materials, required less energy in collecting and makers friendly as the split bamboo can twist and twill even after drying, it can be used by soaking in the water for an hour, which conserves more energy in making the basket. Moreover, bamboo is well grown and mature in a short period, bamboo products are eco-friendly, require simple tools and have no demand for complicated machines at the time of making. The contemporary approaches are based on a modern techno-centric vision of the world but a recent shift of focus to an attempt to understand non-industrial technology in its own terms (Dobres, 2000).

Conclusion

Material culture is conceived of as a language loaded with coded information embedded in a symbolic framework operating within the social domain. It is found that these groups of basketry appliances share a standard character and they are specialized in their function, manufacturing process and pattern. Making artefacts or groups of appliances requires several steps that take a certain amount of time, and they must be maintained throughout their useful life. Carrying a basket is not solely for carrying things. It speaks a lot. Almost everything is for personal or family use, coupled with social and economic significance. The selection of carrying baskets, types or sizes for different items depends on the age or marital status of the user. It is noted in the case of *Kalong*; the visible design, a small slimmer or taper basket symbolizes the female carrier is unmarried and the one with a simple design and bigger or larger basket symbolized her marital status to be married. There is also the traditional practice that one is buried after death along with the associated bamboo appliances that were once used by the deceased person (mostly in the case of females). It signifies how the bamboo basket has its importance socially and culturally among the people of Kabui. This shows the communicative and symbolic value of the appliance. Lastly but not least, the three dimensions of Kabui carry a basket of utilitarian, social and ideational act simultaneously and has a strong association between people and throughout the lifetime of appliances but is situational, changeable and neither unidirectional nor irreversible in a clear-cut systematic context.

Recommendation

The study shows that the Kabui bamboo baskets are indispensable and reflect in age and sex divisions of the appliance uses. Due to modernism impacts, traditional skills of pride have been diminishing. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to revive the traditional skill of bamboo basket along with standardized government policy. Dormitory (*Khangchu*) plays a significant role in Kabui society relating to the making of implements, particularly bamboo products. Therefore, reviving this dormitory through a long-term vision by the state is very much necessary.

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