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Ethno-Engineering And Material Culture A Study Of Bamboo And Cane Craftsmanship In Sustaining The Tripuri Way Of Life.

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural heritage and material ingenuity of the Tiprasa community, focusing on the concept of "Sirisitini simi borok dophabai wajagwi phaimani manw-khunwi" customs and traditions preserved since the dawn of creation. Central to this study is the analysis of "Borok dophani langmao swnamjak manwi," the traditional craftsmanship of essential items required to sustain life from birth to death. By examining indigenous techniques such as weaving, splitting, and binding primarily using bamboo and cane, the study illustrates how the Tripuri people utilize environmental resources through ancestral wisdom. The study shows how these material objects are not merely tools but embodiments of a collective intellect designed for survival and cultural continuity. Ultimately, this paper argues that the integration of locally sourced materials and traditional engineering remains a cornerstone of Tripuri identity and sustainable living in the modern era.

Keywords: Tiprasa Heritage, Tiprasa Material Culture, Ethno-engineering, Bamboo and Cane Craftsmanship, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Cultural Continuity, Sustainable Living.

Introduction

Material Objects Created for the Tripuri Lifestyle

From birth until the end of life, the Tripuri people have crafted and utilized essential objects to sustain their existence and carry out their daily work. They developed various tools and implements tailored to specific tasks, integrating them into their way of life. To create these items, they mastered skills such as weaving, splitting, and binding specifically utilizing bamboo and cane to fashion durable goods. In their quest for survival, whenever a need arose for a specific task, they applied their ingenuity to invent the necessary tool. By using resources found in their local environment, the Tripuri people used their traditional knowledge to craft these essential items for daily use.

The Process of Bamboo Splitting for Essential Needs

To create bamboo crafts, the bamboo is first harvested, after which it is split into strips (waruk). Depending on the required weight and size, the bamboo is split into various widths and thicknesses. For the Tripuri people, most daily essential items are fashioned from these bamboo strips. The splitting technique is determined by the specific item being made. For large, sturdy structures or heavy-duty tools, the strips are made thick and wide. Conversely, for delicate or smaller items, the bamboo is shaved into thin, flexible, and fine strips. Beyond just splitting, when crafting an object, the quality of the bamboo is carefully selected to ensure the strips are durable and suitable for weaving or binding.

The Essential Role of Bamboo in Tripuri Life

The state of Tripura is abundant in forests and natural resources, with bamboo being one of the most accessible and vital materials. Because bamboo grows plentifully near their homes, Tripuri people can harvest it at any time to split it into strips (waruk) and craft necessary items. Historically, since the beginning of their shifting cultivation (huk-haba) practices, the Tripuri people have shared an inseparable bond with bamboo. It is often said that they cannot survive without it; it is the backbone of their existence. Tripura is home to diverse species, including Wandal, Wamwlang, Wamilik, Wathwi, Wasur, and Watotok. Each species is selected based on its specific properties for different tasks. In addition to bamboo, cane (rai) is also integrated into their craftsmanship to fulfil daily needs.

The Essential Tools for Bamboo Craftsmanship in Tripuri Culture

Historical accounts confirm that the Tripuri people have been practitioners of Huk (shifting cultivation) since the beginning of creation. For these agricultural tasks, specific tools are indispensable. The most vital among them is the ‘Da’ or ‘Da Borok’ (traditional Tripuri cutting knife). This versatile tool is crucial for clearing forests for cultivation, felling trees for house construction, and harvesting bamboo. Beyond heavy labor, the Da, is used with precision to shave, split (rechegwi/chirwi), and refine bamboo into fine strips (waruk) for weaving and household binding. Essentially, every stage of bamboo processing, from the initial cut in the forest to the finest artisanal strip, relies on the Da Borok.

The Bamboo Culture of the Tripuri People

Bamboo is the foundation of Tripuri material for craftsmanship, earning the community global respect for its craftsmanship. It is essential for survival; from dawn until dusk, every household task involves bamboo. In the morning, rice is cleaned using a bamboo Bailing; water is carried from the river in a Gola or Twising; and at night, families sleep on a Yankhung or Lamthai (bamboo mats).

However, unlike modern factory-made goods that decay or smell over time, Tripuri bamboo items are incredibly durable and can be preserved for years without spoiling. The artistry is seen in intricate weaving patterns (Bwthai) like Kisip (fan), Bangle, and Tokhumu, as well as various baskets (Dula) like Yongla

and Mono. Traditionally, a man's skill in bamboo work was so vital that it was a prerequisite for marriage; a suitor's ability to craft was tested before he was accepted into a household (Chamari).

Research objective of the study

To explore how bamboo and cane craftsmanship supports the Tripuri way of life in Tripura.

Research Methodology

This study used the primary data, which was collected from the field. using the stratified random sampling technique.

Discussion

1. The Khuturuk: A Traditional Tripuri Storage Vessel

The Khuturuk is a specialized bamboo container used by the Tripuri people for generations. Since the dawn of creation, while practicing Huk (shifting cultivation), the community has utilized forest resources like wood and bamboo to meet their daily needs. Among these creations, the Khuturuk holds a special place. It is a storage chest designed to keep valuable possessions safe, such as traditional attire (Ri-chum), gold and jewelry (Rangchak-Richak), and other essential documents or items.

The Khuturuk is neither too large nor too small; its size is customized according to the owner's preference. It features a distinctive lid or covering system, often woven with a slightly wider or overlapping brim (khochor) to ensure it seals tightly, protecting the treasures kept inside.

Image: Khuturuk

The construction of a Khuturuk requires immense skill and the right materials. Wamilik is the preferred bamboo species because it is exceptionally flexible, allowing for intricate bending without breaking. The weaving process begins at the base with four corners and progresses upward. To ensure durability, the weaver inserts two additional layers of fine bamboo strips at the bottom for structural strength. The finishing involves smoothing the edges with a sharp tool and reinforcing the rim to prevent unraveling. Finally, a tightly fitted lid with an overlapping brim (khonchor) is crafted.

Historically, every Tripuri household possessed a Khuturuk. However, in the modern era, this tradition is fading. With the rise of commercial marketplaces and ready-made plastic or metal storage alternatives, the Khuturuk is disappearing from daily use. Today, it is mostly found in museums or the homes of village elders. Modern youth are becoming increasingly unfamiliar with this craft as market-bought goods replace handmade ancestral tools.

2. The Sudam: A Traditional Tripuri Fishing Tool

The Sudam is an essential bamboo implement used by the Tripuri people for harvesting A (fish), a vital source of nutrition in their diet. While modern methods like electric fishing or nylon nets exist, the Sudam remains a preferred traditional tool, especially for small fish in specific environments. It is primarily used in Khatil (shallow drainage channels or trenches dug in paddy fields). During the rainy season, fish gather in these water-filled trenches; when the water is drained or filtered during the sunny season, the Sudam is placed at the exit point. Its unique design, wide at the front and tapering to a narrow, closed end, acts as a trap, ensuring that while water passes through, the fish remain captured inside.

Image: Sudam

The construction of a Sudam is a testament to the efficiency of Tripuri bamboo engineering. The process begins with the selection of Wamilik, favored for its superior flexibility and strength.

Construction Techniques:

Structure: The weaver starts by creating a wide, circular mouth that gradually tapers into a narrow, closed end. This "funnel" shape is secured by gathering the bamboo strips at the base in a technique called bulam muthupjaknai.

Reinforcement: To ensure the trap can withstand the pressure of flowing water in a Khatil, the edges are reinforced with wa phekok (thick bamboo splits) and bound tightly with fine waruk (bamboo strips) to make the frame rigid and durable.

Efficiency: Unlike more complex items like the Khuturuk, a Sudam can be crafted quickly, often within half a day, and its size is completely customizable based on the specific stream or trench where it will be used.

3. The Kisip: A Traditional Tripuri Bamboo Fan

The Kisip is a handcrafted bamboo fan, an essential item in every Tripuri household used to combat the intense heat of the Tungblang (summer season). As the seasons transition from the cool months to the scorching heat, the Kisip provides a portable and sustainable cooling solution.

Design and Artistry:

The structure of a Kisip is typically rectangular or square, similar to a Yamphura (traditional mat), but smaller and more refined. Unlike plain utility items, the Kisip is often a canvas for artistic expression. Skilled weavers incorporate intricate patterns known as Buthai, such as Thaipulobar (lemon flower pattern) or Hingrabar, making the fan both a functional tool and a piece of cultural art.

Image: Kisip

Construction Method (Wamani Raida):

Building a Kisip requires precise material preparation. It is woven using either wakur (double-layered strips) or a combination of wabahan and wabuk (warp and weft). A small, smooth bamboo handle (waphisa) is integrated into the side, and the edges are reinforced by binding them tightly with fine waruk (bamboo strips) to prevent fraying. Despite its small size, creating an intricate Kisip typically takes three to four days.

Sociological Shift:

Historically, the Kisip was indispensable due to the lack of electricity. However, the widespread availability of electric fans and cheap mass-produced plastic fans in local markets has led to a sharp decline in traditional bamboo fan making. What was once a household necessity is now becoming a rare craft, primarily used only when modern power fails or kept as a decorative heritage item.

4. The Dol: Traditional Tripuri Grain Silo

The Dol is a large bamboo granary or storage vessel essential to the Tripuri livelihood, which has been centered around Huk (shifting cultivation) since the beginning of history. After the harvest of paddy (Mai) and other crops, the Dol serves as the primary container to preserve grains for year-round consumption. It is designed to keep the rice dry and safe from pests. Structurally, the Dol is characterized by a wide, circular body with a slightly tapered base and an open top, engineered to hold a significant volume of grain.

Wamani Raida (Construction Method):

Material: To withstand the heavy weight of stored grain, the waruk (bamboo strips) are split much thicker and wider than those used for smaller items like the Kisip.

Technique: The weaving begins at the base with a reinforced "knot" or overlapping center, gradually expanding outward and upward.

Reinforcement: The rim of the Dol is finished with thick bamboo splits (waphikog) and bound tightly with fine strips to ensure structural integrity under pressure.

Timeframe: Due to its size and the strength required, crafting a single Dol takes approximately half a month (15 days).

Modern Context:

However, the Dol is becoming rare. In modern households, it is increasingly replaced by bosta (jute or plastic sacks), which are cheaper and easier to acquire, though less effective at long-term preservation compared to the ventilated bamboo structure.

5. The Yamphwra: The Traditional Tripuri Bamboo Mat

The Yamphwra is a fundamental piece of Tripuri household furniture, used primarily as a floor mat for sitting and socialising. Since ancient times, it has served as the communal "seat" of the home. While the Khampwlai (a small wooden or bamboo stool) is also used for sitting, the Yamphwra remains the most popular choice because it can accommodate multiple people and is deeply rooted in the community's social fabric.

Image: Yamphwra

Wamani Raida (Construction Method):

The creation of a Yamphwra begins with harvesting the correct bamboo, which is then processed using a Da to create waruk (strips). The weaving technique varies based on the desired durability:

Wakur (Double-layer): Using only the outer skin of the bamboo results in a very strong, rigid mat.

Wabahan (warp-based): This method produces a softer, more flexible mat.

A standard mat sized for common seating typically takes two to three days to complete. While the size is customizable, ranging from small personal mats to large communal ones—the technical precision remains the same.

Modern Displacement:

The Yamphwra is facing a significant decline. As the Tripuri lifestyle evolves with time, traditional mats are being replaced by mass-produced plastic mats and plastic chairs (Khampwlai) available in local markets (hathi). Today, these handcrafted bamboo mats are rarely seen in modern homes, surviving primarily in the households of village elders (chakwra).

6. The Chekhok: The Traditional Filter for Tripuri Cuisine

The Chekhok (or Chakhwikhok) is an indispensable bamboo tool used to produce Chakhwi, the signature alkaline ingredient of Tripuri cuisine. Since time immemorial, the Tripuri people have relied on the Chekhok to filter water through charred bamboo or wood ash (thapwla). This filtered liquid, known as Chakhwi, is considered the "King of Dishes" (mwi okwra) and is mandatory for all major social and religious gatherings, including weddings and funerals.

Ritual and Cultural Significance:

Beyond cooking, the Chekhok plays a vital role in sacred traditions. Among the Tipra people, during wedding ceremonies, the filtered alkaline water is used to ritually wash the heads of the bride and groom.

Image: Chekhok

Wamani Raida (Construction Method):

Creating a Chekhok requires precision to ensure it can support the weight of wet ash and water during the filtration process.

Structure: It is woven with a narrow, tapered base (khochor) and a wide, flared opening at the top to allow for easy pouring of water.

Durability: Because the Chekhok must be suspended (khachiwi) while in use, it is reinforced with thick bamboo strips woven into a "rope-like" binding (buduk) to ensure it doesn't break under tension.

Timeframe: A high-quality Chekhok typically takes about five days to complete.

Modern Displacement by "Suda" (Baking Soda):

The traditional method of extracting alkaline water from wood ash is rapidly vanishing. In modern Tripuri households, commercial baking soda (Suda) has replaced the labor-intensive process of filtering ash through a Chekhok.

7. The Yangkhung: The Versatile Bamboo Mat for Rest and Harvest

The Yangkhung is a fundamental bamboo textile used by the Tripuri people, serving as both a sleeping surface and a critical agricultural tool. Since ancient times, it has been used as a mattress base, topped with Ritwrak (traditional blankets) or other cloths for sleeping. Beyond the bedroom, the Yangkhung is indispensable during the harvest season; it is spread out to dry paddy (Maichwlam lamna) or used as a sturdy surface for winnowing and processing grains. In some variations, a Kaniya (a specialized border or reinforced mat) is crafted alongside it to enhance its utility for agricultural tasks.

Image: Yangkhung

Wamani Raida (Construction Method):

Weaving a Yangkhung is a labor-intensive process that requires high-quality materials and patience.

Material Choice: Wamilik is often used for its flexibility, but Watolok is specifically favored for larger mats because it has long internodes (the distance between joints), allowing for long, continuous strips without weak points.

Technique: It is woven using the Wabuk (weft-only) style, which makes the mat flexible and lightweight. The edges are meticulously reinforced and "locked" (rapbwi) to prevent the strips from sliding or fraying.

Timeframe: Due to its size and the precision required for a smooth finish, a single Yangkhung can take up to one month (talsa) to complete.

The "Polythene" Shift:

Like many other bamboo artifacts, the Yangkhung is being replaced by modern industrial materials.

From Forest to Market: Historically, the Yangkhung was essential for Huk (shifting cultivation) and drying paddy. Today, as many Tripuri farmers transition from hilly Huk to lowland paddy fields (kheto), they have also shifted their tools.

Efficiency vs. Tradition: Farmers now prefer Polythene sheets for drying grain. Polythene is cheaper, readily available in markets (hathi), and absorbs heat faster, causing the paddy to dry more quickly than on a bamboo mat.

8. The Lamthai: A Tripuri Cane Mat for Comfort

The Lamthai is a traditional mat woven from Rai (cane), used primarily as a sleeping and sitting surface. Unlike the bamboo Yamphwra, the Lamthai is often laid down during the colder Koloma (winter season) for added comfort or insulation. It is typically woven in a double-layered or broad-width style, providing a durable yet flexible ground cover.

9. The Baling: The Heart of Tripuri Agriculture and Ritual

The Baling (winnowing fan) is one of the most culturally significant bamboo and cane items in the Tripuri household. It is used extensively in the post-harvest process to separate the chaff from the grain (Mai). After the paddy is dried on a Yangkhung, the Baling is used to toss the grain into the air, allowing the wind to blow away the empty husks while the heavy rice falls back into the fan. Beyond the kitchen, it is a sacred object used in religious rituals, funerals (Maikhli), and offerings to the deities. Most famously, it is the central prop in the Garia Dance and other folk dances, where it symbolizes the community's agricultural identity.

Image: Baling

The construction of a Baling is a delicate balance of strength and flexibility, utilizing both Wa (bamboo) and Rai (cane).

Construction Process:

The Body: The main surface is woven using high-quality wakur (outer-layer bamboo strips). These strips are split finely and woven in a tight pattern to ensure no grain can fall through the gaps.

The Frame: Once the flat surface is complete, it is shaped into its characteristic form with a raised rim. This rim is reinforced with thick bamboo splits to provide a sturdy grip.

Reinforcement: The most critical step involves the Raikon (cane strips). The edges are bound with processed cane (raiduk) to make them milik (smooth) and kwrak (strong). This cane binding prevents the bamboo from fraying during the vigorous shaking and tossing movements of winnowing.

10. The Dula: The Traditional Tripuri Fisherman's Basket

The Dula is a small, specialized bamboo basket designed specifically for carrying fish (A) while working in the fields or streams. It is the constant companion of the Sudam (trap); as fish like Khangwrai, Athuk, and Agura are caught, they are transferred into the Dula for safe-keeping.

Wamani Raida (Construction Method):

Technique: The Dula is woven with a "Gola" (rounded) technique, creating a bulbous body that is wider at the bottom and tapers toward a narrower neck.

Design: It features a slightly open weave to allow water to drain out while keeping the catch secure.

Portability: Like the Chempai, the Dula is equipped with a Buduk (strap), allowing the fisherman to tie it around the waist (buchango) so that both hands remain free to handle the Sudam or nets.

Size: It is typically crafted in a "Chikon" (small) size, optimized for the small indigenous fish species found in Tripura's paddy fields and rivulets.

Image: Dula

11. The Japa: The Traditional Tripuri Safe-Box

The Japa is a specialized, high-security bamboo and cane container traditionally used as a "safe-box" for the Tripuri people. Measuring approximately 25cm in diameter and 33cm in height, it is meticulously crafted to protect small valuables—such as Rangchak (gold), Rukphai (silver), and Rang-puisa (money)—as well as delicate accessories and heirlooms.

Wamani Raida (Construction & Security):

Materials: It is woven using fine 6mm bamboo strips (waruk) and reinforced with raiduk (cane binding).

Design: To ensure the contents remain free from dust and moisture, the Japa features a double-layered or tightly sealed lid (bwkwlab/thukulubwi).

Security: Unlike modern plastic boxes, the Japa is celebrated for its durability and its "anti-theft" design. The complex weaving and locking mechanism make it difficult for an intruder to open quickly or quietly.

Modern Status: Despite the availability of modern metal or plastic safes, many Tripuri families still prefer the Japa for its traditional security and aesthetic beauty.

12. The Phuta: The Decorative Accessory Case

The Phuta is a small, beautifully crafted bamboo container used for storing delicate household items or spices (mosorog). It features a reinforced four-cornered base and a sturdy rim bound with fine bamboo splits. Crafting a Phuta requires high artistic skill (yak gwnang), as it serves both as a functional organizer and a decorative piece of home decor.

13. The Sobam: The Weaver's Tension Tool

The Sobam is a critical component of the Tripuri traditional loom. It is used to maintain tension and hold the warp threads (thanti) in place while weaving Ri (traditional cloth). Traditionally woven from bamboo (wakur), it can also be made from Misip bukur (animal hide/skin) for added durability. The Sobam allows the weaver to create the rhythmic patterns that define Tripuri textiles.

14. The Choka (or Jurka): The Flow-fishing Trap

The Choka is a unique hydraulic fishing trap measuring 100cm in length and 19cm in width. It is designed for flowing water in rivulets or irrigation channels.

Engineering: One end is split and kept wide (bokobom), while the body is bound with 12mm bamboo strips.

Function: It is placed strategically where water flows rapidly. As fish travel with the current, they are funneled into the Choka and trapped at the narrow end. This represents a "passive" fishing technique that relies on the natural movement of the water.

15. The Langa: The Traditional Backpack

The Langa is the iconic Tripuri carrying basket, measuring 70cm in height and 45cm in width. It is the primary vehicle for transporting goods over long distances or hilly terrains.

Design: It is woven with 9mm bamboo strips and features a sturdy base that widens toward the top.

The Head-Strap (Lambak Bukur): A critical feature is the strap made from Lambak bukur (bark of the Lambak tree), which allows the bearer to carry heavy loads—such as bamboo shoots (Muya), firewood, or market goods—by supporting the weight on the forehead.

Utility: Whether going to the Hathi (market) or the Huk (field), the Langa is the essential tool for daily logistics.

Image: Langa

16. Twising

Measurements 48cm width, 70cm length. Materials needed Bamboo (Waruk), outer layer of cane/creeper (Lambak bukur).

The Twising is an essential item in the daily life of the Borok people, used for tasks such as fetching water, going to the river ghat, and carrying firewood from the forest. When going to fetch water, a traditional gourd container (Gola) is filled and placed inside the Twising; it allows one to carry more containers than by hand alone. If the water source is far, the Twising is used to carry heavy loads like vegetables, ginger, rice, and creepers by hanging it [on the back]. Aside from this, it is used for gathering firewood in the forest; carrying wood in a Twising is much more efficient and less tiring than carrying it on one's head. To make a Twising, it is woven similarly to a Langa (another basket), but with a slight difference: the bamboo strips (Waruk) are woven with wider gaps (Keseng keseng) to make it lightweight and functional for its purpose

Image: Twising

17. Waying

A traditional item made of bamboo strips (Waruk) that has been part of the Borok people's lifestyle since ancient times.

The Waying is primarily used for putting small infants to sleep. When a baby cries, they are placed inside the Waying and rocked back and forth; the gentle swinging motion soon lulls them into a deep, peaceful sleep. This is how the people of old used to soothe and put children to rest.

To make a Waying, bamboo is split into strips. It is woven larger than a standard basket (Mandrop) to ensure the infant fits comfortably. To make it strong, two long, sturdy pieces of split bamboo are placed at the bottom to start the frame. The middle section is woven with a slightly open pattern (Keseng), while the edges are woven very densely for strength. Finally, it is finished by tightly binding the edges to ensure it is secure and durable.

Image: Waying

18. Khum khari

Since ancient times, the Tiprasa people have practiced traditions involving gods and deities. When offering prayers to these deities, flowers are essential. The Khum khari is used specifically for gathering and carrying these flowers.

Skilled weavers can create the Khum khari in various beautiful designs. It is woven using bamboo strips (Waruk) in a somewhat loose or open-work pattern (Keseng keseng), making it lightweight and delicate (Kwlwlwk). To finish it, a handle is woven into the structure to make it easy to hold and carry.

Image: Khum khari

Findings

This shows that Tripuri material culture is a sophisticated manifestation of ethno-engineering, where bamboo is not merely a resource but a structural foundation of identity. The study identifies a highly specialized taxonomic approach to material selection; craftsmen distinguish between bamboo species such as Wamilik for flexibility in intricate weaving (e.g., the Khuturuk storage chest) and Wathwi or Waruk for structural rigidity in load-bearing tools like the Twising and Ura.

However, a critical finding is the multidisciplinary nature of these objects. Tools like the Sudam (fishing trap) and Siching demonstrate advanced fluid dynamics and mechanical engineering principles, designed to filter water while capturing nutrition. Furthermore, the study shows the sociocultural integration of craftsmanship; historically, a man's proficiency in bamboo work (Chamari) served as a vital social credential and a prerequisite for marriage. However, the data indicates a precarious transition: the arrival of non-biodegradable, mass-produced alternatives (plastics and metals) is causing a decline in indigenous knowledge, rendering once-essential items like the Khuturuk increasingly confined to museums.

Conclusion

The craftsmanship of the Tripuri people represents a harmonious intersection of ecological sustainability and functional design. Through the mastery of splitting (rechegwi), shaving, and weaving, the community has developed a circular economy that utilizes renewable forest resources to meet every human need from infancy to old age. However, this study argues that the preservation of Tripuri bamboo and cane culture is essential for maintaining cultural continuity. While modern market forces threaten these ancestral practices, the inherent sustainability and durability of these "ethno-engineered" objects offer valuable lessons for contemporary environmental challenges. To prevent the extinction of this heritage, it is imperative to bridge the gap between traditional wisdom and modern utility, ensuring that the Borok identity remains rooted in its "bamboo backbone" while adapting to the digital age.

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