

# Blurred Boundaries: Exploring Textile Heritage of the *Khasi Bhoi*, *Karbi* and *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* of the Ri Bhoi District in Meghalaya, Northeast India

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This article explores scenarios of blurred boundaries between ethnic cultures in the Ri Bhoi District of Northeast (NE) India. These geographical and social spaces are where shared experience defines the people as much as their ethnic group, and where cultural assimilation or transmission has been taking place over many generations. The case study of this article is an empirical study of cultural transmission through the example of textiles and traditional textile technology. It explores transmission of knowledge and skill across the *Khasi Bhoi*, the *Karbi* and the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* ethnic communities of the Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya, and transmission of cultural aesthetics in terms of garment, cloth and motif. The fluidity of the textile culture between these communities in the Ri Bhoi District is striking, with designs borrowed, traditional technology adopted and tricks of the trade shared, leading to a shared textile heritage of the Ri Bhoi District existing alongside their distinct ethnic identities. The case study sits as a micro example of scenarios that are played out across the region, exploring the notion of an ethnic identity of NE India that transcends political and state boundaries, of identities at a time individual yet communal, ethnically distinct yet aligned as a region.

**Keywords:** Handloom, motif, cultural transmission, Meghalaya, eri silk

## Introduction

Handwoven textiles engage with the human social world in various forms - as clothing, blankets, bedding or home decor, as gifts and sales, or through ritual and cultural celebration. Handwoven textiles are far more than the warp and weft, far more than the colour or the design. They offer insight into intangible aspects of life, such as knowledge, belief and identity. Dig a little deeper and one can find indications of history or social change, or social structures of community. The focus of this article is handloom of NE India, drawing on recently completed research in the Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya.

The research is firmly located within textiles and handweaving, exploring the notion of an ethnic identity of NE India that transcends political and state boundaries. Using the example of handwoven textiles, it explores how traditional knowledge and cultural habits are transmitted, assimilated or rejected and how a shared textile culture appears to have evolved. This is significant in the broader debate on regional identity, where one considers the distinct nature of the northeast region to 'mainstream' India, where the many differing tribes of the region contribute to a collective regional identity. The case study of this research uses textiles to illustrate there is a shared ground bonding ethnic groups, while this shared ground also exists in many aspects of socio-cultural life bonding ethnic groups of the region. For example, shared agricultural practices, shared culinary habits, shared natural raw materials, shared physical and climatic environment. One can identify great diversity of ethnic culture in the northeast region, yet these shared experiences bind people in a way that creates a regional identity. This research contributes to this notion of the 'togetherness' of the region, of identities both individual yet communal, ethnically distinct yet aligned as a region.

There is a long history of tribal migration across NE India and the neighbouring countries. Long before modern day political borders were drawn, power continually rose and fell between tribal groups or rulers of the respective kingdoms, constantly shifting the demographic of the region. The Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya, where the case study of this research is situated, has been the location of many such demographic changes over the centuries, evolving as a multi-cultural district where cultural knowledge is exchanged, observed and often absorbed as neighbouring cultures interact. This article aims to demonstrate this cultural transmission through the lens of handwoven textiles. The Ri Bhoi District, on the border of Assam is home to *Khasi Bhoi*, *Karbi/Mikir*, *Khat-ar Lyngdoh*, *Tiwa/Lalung*, *Garos*, *Biate* and *Bodo* ethnic groups and Nepali and Assamese communities. The border between Assam and Meghalaya is open, with people, trade and culture moving in both directions. The fluidity of the textile culture between these communities in the Ri Bhoi District is striking, with designs borrowed, traditional technology adopted and skills of the trade shared, leading to a shared textile heritage of the Ri Bhoi District existing alongside their distinct ethnic identities. For the purpose of ensuring achievable fieldwork, the case study of this research was focused on a defined geographical area within the Ri Bhoi District of Raid Nongthluh and Hima Khat-ar Lyngdoh (in Raid Nongpoh) and on three select ethnic groups of the *Khasi Bhoi*, the *Karbi* and the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh*. Although they are a small community of the Ri Bhoi District, the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* have been included in the research as their rich textile culture demonstrates well-developed skill with a defined aesthetic and offers fascinating examples of transmission of textile knowledge. There is little published documentation on their culture and this article begins to address that gap by highlighting their textile heritage. There is great scope to broaden the research to consider the textile culture of other ethnicities present in the Ri Bhoi District. This study is therefore both a micro example of the Ri Bhoi District and of NE India as a region, demonstrating an ethnic landscape that is both deep and diverse.

## **Cultural transmission**

The purpose of this article is to highlight the 'in-between spaces' (Bhabha 1994) of ethnic culture in the Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya, NE India. These are spaces where shared experience defines the people as much as their ethnic group, and where cultural assimilation or transmission takes place on many different levels and in a variety of situations. The case study of this article explores knowledge and skill transmission across the ethnic communities, and transmission of cultural aesthetics in the form of garment, cloth and motif. This has resulted in a gradual blurring of textile identity between the respective ethnic groups.

Ethnicity is the identification of a person or group, based on a common ancestry, a common racial, social and cultural identity, language and aesthetic. It is a cultural marker that indicates shared traditions and inherited heritage. Although it is generally inherited by birth, ethnic identity is not necessarily static, remaining as it was in ancestral times. There are many different studies on ethnicity and perspectives on the nature of fluidity of ethnic identity (Van den Berghe 1987, Geertz 1973, Barth 1969, Ballard 2002).

This article demonstrates that the ethnicity of the *Khasi Bhoi*, the *Karbi* and the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* have both inherited and shared cultural features that have evolved over generations. It maintains that while the ethnic identity of these groups is grounded in their ancestral lineage, religion, language defining the core of the respective groups, ethnic identity can also evolve, or respond to the influence of the surrounding area, people and social scenarios. Through the study of the textiles, it is evident that there is immense sharing and overlapping of designs that suggest that ethnic groups are not bounded in the same way as many have thought, but indeed there's a shared cultural milieu that people are invested in through marriage, trade, festivals and informal socialising. In the case of this study, it creates a shared ground for an identity that binds neighbouring ethnic groups. As such it demonstrates that cultural systems or structures maintained within ethnic groups have their own situationally adaptive logic (Barth 1969, Ballard 2002) and those who use them sustain and revise their contents at their discretion. Aspects of ethnic identity may be consciously emphasized by the elites of a group for reasons such as nationalistic, political or economic gain (Brass 1991) however this article explores cultural aspects within the practice of handloom that are more organically assimilated and transmitted across ethnic groups.

'Culture' is defined as socially transmitted information such as beliefs, knowledge, skills or practices, that is transmitted between individuals, communities and generations (Mesoudi 2015). Culture shapes the behaviour of a particular society, it can change over the generations, cultural identity is not necessarily a biologically inherited identity and is not necessarily exclusive to any one ethnic group. Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman (1981) recognised that, unlike biological traits primarily transmitted vertically through genetics, cultural traits can be transmitted through at least three paths: 1) from parent-to-child (vertical transmission), 2) between peers of the same generation (horizontal transmission), and 3) from non-family members of an elder generation to the younger generation (oblique transmission). All of these paths of cultural transmission are situated within the context of learning, from simple observation and imitation of behaviour, to transmission of every day skills through instruction, to learning within a formal classroom. This article follows the theory that learning in small-scale societies is informal and unlikely to occur in schools (Atran & Sperber 1991), and it focuses on the transmission of culture that takes place without instruction. In the context of handloom in the Ri Bhoi District in current times, training in handloom and skill development is given by both the state government and non-governmental organisations that transfer technical knowledge through instruction, but when it comes to textile heritage which embodies the textile culture of the Ri Bhoi District, for example traditional loom technology, the use of colour, garments, motifs and their socio-cultural significance, it is more often an informal process of knowledge transmission and absorption, taking place through shared experience, shared celebration or observation, a gradual process of knowledge transmission. This informal, socially situated learning can cross ethnic borders (Messoudi 2017), in constant flux, as an ebb and flow of cultural transmission. In this exchange, cultural elements may be transferred, but the intangible relationship a person has with a tool, cloth, or motif for example may be different. A motif may have travelled between groups, adapted to the respective loom technology of the weaver, but the cultural significance does not necessarily follow with the transmission of motif. The interpretation may be different, relating to the set of values of the respective ethnicities and the association with particular motifs, symbols and cultural practices.

Tools are a significant part of material culture and being tangible objects, they offer much scope for studying the evolution of traditional technology and therefore culture. Buckley and Boudot's (2015) comprehensive study of traditional weaving technology of Southwest China focused on the border area of Southwest China as the ancient geographical origin of many ethnic groups of Southeast Asia. They defined this particular region as a centre of cultural diversity and key to understanding other textile traditions and weaving methods in the Asian region. Their research in mapping technological developments of looms across East and Southeast Asia (2017) demonstrates the lineages of transmission of handloom knowledge and handloom technology, giving a fresh perspective to the debate on the evolution of culture. The handloom technology studied in this research is simple, yet the transmission of technique and loom structure falls in line with Buckley and Boudot's theory of parallels between the evolution of handloom technology and the assimilation of culture.

The transmission of culture, skills, knowledge between ethnic communities blurs the boundaries of defined ethnic communities, in many other examples beyond tangible textiles. Desmond Kharmawphlang's research into the folklore and customs of the Ri Bhoi District identifies the liminality between cultures, where multiple systems of religions and cultures are co-existing, multiple ethnic groups are "interacting and creating an unspoken, multi-lingual discourse" (personal interview, Kharmawphlang 2016). Philippe Ramirez (2010, 2013, 2016) explored similar locations within the Ri Bhoi District offering insight into the nature of ethnic conversions and cultural assimilation through a study of linguistics and names of clans. The scenarios that both researchers identify are specific in their example of the Ri Bhoi District, yet not uncommon in the broader context of NE India and beyond. The research presented in this article therefore adds to this discussion, exploring the notion of ethnicity cutting across geo-political boundaries and of textile cultures transcending defined territories and defined ethnic identities.

## Introduction to the case study

### *Meghalaya and the Ri Bhoi District*

Meghalaya, meaning the 'abode of the clouds' in Sanskrit, lies on the eastern border of Bangladesh. With two districts that claim to be the wettest place on earth, Meghalaya is not short of water. Plateaus, rock formations, coal mines and limestone mountains and the moor-like hills of Cherrapunji are intersected by rivers and streams that become raging rivers with impressive waterfalls in monsoon. As you descend north from Shillong, the fertile low-lying hills of the Ri Bhoi District gradually become the plains of Assam.

The Ri Bhoi District is one of eleven districts of Meghalaya. The state of Assam runs along the north, east and west borders and the south side of the Ri Bhoi borders the districts of the East and West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. The highway between Guwahati, the capital of Assam, and Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya intersects the district, an important artery of the northeast region. With a lower altitude than the other districts of Meghalaya, the Ri Bhoi District gets the best of the climate from both states; the rain from Meghalaya yet without the chill from the highlands, along with the sun of Assam yet without the stifling humidity of the Assamese flood plains. As a result, it is the most fertile of district of Meghalaya, and along with the West Garo Hills, is the agricultural heart of Meghalaya.

The primary ethnic groups of the state of Meghalaya are the *Khasis*, the *Jaintias* and the *Garos*, largely defined by their location in the Khasi hills, Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills shown in figure 1. A unifying thread amongst these ethnic groups is the matrilineal structure of their societies. Not to be confused with a matriarchal society where women have authority, the *Khasi* matrilineal society reveres the maternal ancestress of the clan. The family lineage is passed on through the mother and the ancestral property traditionally goes to the youngest daughter of the family, along with the responsibility of continuing and maintaining the home and the clan. Authority and political decision making however, rest with the male members of the clan. The village council, known as the *dorbar shnong* is made of village elders, and moderated by the headman, known as the *rongbah shnong*. Traditionally, all members of the *kur* (the clan) and the *shnong* are equal, and disagreements that cannot be resolved are passed on to the *syiem* (head of state), who acts as a neutral authority with a number of *shnong* in his jurisdiction, or his *raid*. A further structure exists where several *raid* are grouped together to form a *hima*, which for the sake of translation is understood to be a kingdom, with one *syiem* assuming the responsibility as the political head. The *lyngdoh* is another figure who holds great respect and responsibility, since he is the one who performs the traditional rituals. This role in western society translates as 'priest', although this translation among others commonly used for *Khasi* words, is an example of the difficulty in translating an ancient indigenous social structure into the context of western society.

The close proximity of the Ri Bhoi District to Assam and the interaction with ethnic communities non-native to Meghalaya has created a cultural melting pot of ethnicities, where cultural transmission



Figure 1: Districts of Meghalaya.

is taking place between communities. The semantics of the name itself, “Ri Bhoi” is the first indication of this cultural melting pot. Originating in the *Karew* language - the original name and language of the indigenous people of the Ri Bhoi District, the word *Bhoi* translates as *outsiders* and the word *Ri* means *land*. The outsiders in this context are the *Karbi* (also known as *Mikir*) people, the *Tiwa* (*Lalu*), *Bodo* - essentially the non-native tribals, and the Assamese and the Nepalis who have migrated from neighbouring Assam or beyond. The name *Khasi Bhoi*, a subtribe of the *Khasi* family thus reflects centuries of interaction with the *outsider* tribes, as a term to indicate differentiation from the *Khasi* people of the uplands of the East and West Khasi Hills. Many *Khasi Bhoi* communities today continue to identify themselves as *Karew*, but accept that the wider *Khasi* communities know them as *Bhoi*, or *Khasi Bhoi*.

The *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* community are also a *Khasi* sub-tribe located in the Ri-Bhoi District. They are a small community, and somewhat less visible in the wider context of the *Khasi* ethnic family. There is a long history of cultural assimilation of the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* people that can be traced back even to the formation of the subtribe itself. The name *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* translates literally from *Khasi* as ‘Twelve Priests’. This name was created on the establishment of a new combined kingdom or *hima*, administered by twelve (*khat-ar*) priests (*lyngdoh*). This *hima* was made up of the original *Karew* clans living in the area and the *Jaintia* clans who settled there in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, fleeing from the tyrannical rule of the then *syiem* of the Jaintia Hills (Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya (n.d.) and Lyngdoh, F. personal communication, Nov 2016). The *Jaintias* are both geographically and culturally close to the *Khasi* people, hence the apparent smooth transition from a *Jaintia* identity to a *Khasi* identity centuries ago.

The third ethnic community of this study is the *Karbi*. The *Karbhis* are believed to have historical origins in Myanmar, arriving in Assam to escape the cultural persecution of the Burmese, although there appears to be no conclusive data or opinion to pinpoint the period. It is however widely agreed by scholars and the *Karbhis* themselves that the *Karbi* community faced persecution from many of the dominant ethnic groups of the region, in addition to the Burmese, the *Kacharis* and the *Ahoms* in Assam and the *Khasis* and the *Jaintias* in Meghalaya. Today, the *Karbhis* are dispersed across the plains of Assam (primarily Kamrup and Morigaon), in the low-lying areas around Dimapur in Nagaland, and the Ri Bhoi District in Meghalaya. The hilly topography of the district defines the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District (in the state of Assam), where the largest concentration of *Karbi* population is located. The district is split into two, with West Karbi Anlong bordering the RiBhoi District (figure 2).

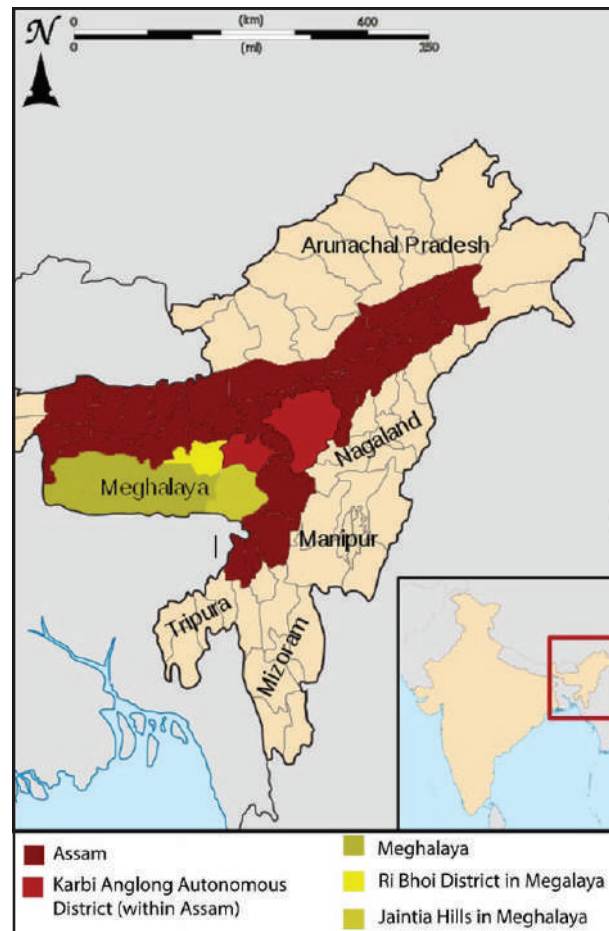


Figure 2: Map indicating the key geographical areas of the study.

The primary difference in culture between the *Khasis* and *Karbhis* of Meghalaya is the matrilineal system of the *Khasis* and the patrilineal system of the *Karbhis*. However, within the patrilineal context, *Karbi* women have established respect and independence through generating their own economy based on their advanced weaving skills (Sharma, 2014). An interesting situation arises when intermarriages take place in the Ri Bhoi District. It is most commonly a *Khasi* man who would take a *Karbi* bride. Adopting a woman from a patrilineal community into the matrilineal *Khasi* community is an accepted way of continuing the lineage of a clan, with the formation of a new line of the clan. The term “*shim Bhoi*” literally meaning to “take an *outsider* (wife)” has even evolved to describe this process, indicating the frequency of the situation arising (Kharmawphlang 2016). As many *Karbi* women weave, one can conclude that they would bring their physical fabrics to their new home, and share their knowledge of weaving and technical skills with the women around them. Returning to the theme of knowledge transmission, Buckley & Boudot (2017) note that this scenario of intermarriage seems to be the main vector by which weaving culture moves ‘horizontally’, inter-community.

This introduction to the *Khasi Bhoi*, *Karbi* and *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* highlights the interconnected nature of the tribes over many centuries in a relatively small area of Northeast India, an area that crosses political state borders, positioned at the crossroads of several ethnic cultures. The example of the three ethnic communities of this study and their histories of migration and interaction are the tip of the iceberg in the study of the multicultural nature of the Ri Bhoi District, a micro example of an even broader story. The Ri Bhoi District is an area that has historically offered solace to those fleeing persecution, an attractive location to settle in with an agreeable climate and fertile land to support a self-sufficient agricultural lifestyle, a comfortable but humble life, and accepting of outsider

cultures. Long before political borders were drawn, the multi-ethnic characteristic of this area was long established.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the Highland *Khasis*, the Ri Bhoi District was considered as wild, backward and not particularly attractive. Kharmawphlang (2016) refers to the notion of the 'other domain' of the Ri Bhoi *Khasi* subtribes arising from the superiority of the *Khasi* clans of the highlands who tend to look down upon the Bhoi culture for lacking the purity of the *Khasi* culture. Through examples of folklore, he reveals subaltern narratives of the Ri Bhoi suggesting that the Bhoi paradigm (set in opposition to the centres of power Shillong or Sohra) is not completely submissive. Tarun Bhartiya addressed the undercurrent of hierarchy within the *Khasi* tribes in the Ri Bhoi District through the medium of film (*Songs to Live By*, 2015), at one point questioning: 'are border cultures loose bricks in the ethnic purity construct of the majority?' - The majority being the *Khasi* rather than subtribes who may have assimilated cultural aspects of other ethnic communities. Perhaps this notion of resistance of *Khasi* subtribes towards the *Khasi* centres of power is similar to the *Karbis* long history of persecution, or the ancestral memory of persecution that forced the original *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* settlers to flee to the Ri Bhoi District. One could suggest that this common subaltern existence has aligned the ethnicities in the Ri Bhoi District rather than creating a need to define their differences.

The Ri Bhoi District is therefore a rich ground for the study of cultural transmission and interaction. Textiles reveal this story in the tangible form of garments, cloth, fibre and motif and the intangible transmission of skills and cultural practices.

### ***Raw materials and technique***

In this research, handwoven textiles are the vehicle through which the phenomenon of cultural transmission is explored. Textiles can in a sense be 'read' as a piece of social history tangible piece of social history. The cloth, the designs, the raw material and the woven technique all offer insight into cultural exchange and social change. In order to observe what these subtle cultural indicators are, it is necessary to understand the full process of production and the relationship with people, place and social history. One of the first pieces of academic research to explore raw materials was Louise Cort's (1991) study of tree bast fibres of Japan. Her research situated the fibres in their historical and ecological context, describing the labour process through which they are produced, illustrating how raw materials embody culture and intangible meaning as significant as the finished cloth itself. More recent material culture studies recognise the agency of raw materials (Tilley 2004, Ingold 2013) and the transformation process of raw material to product, describing it as a collaboration between nature and artisan (Drazin & Kuchler 2015), Alfred Gell refers to the tension or exchange between object and artist as 'the enchantment of technology' (1992: 44) which André Leroi-Gourhan describes as a 'dialogue between the maker and the material' (1993: 306). Ingold (2013), speaks of the artisan 'joining forces' with the materials. It is the creative decision-making process, the sensory awareness of the artisan, the physical nature of the raw material and the transformative manual process applied to the raw material that brings an artefact into being.

Artisanal knowledge systems are built into the physical and social world of the immediate environment, in such a way that knowledge is created and passed on through practical and lived experience, through awareness and observation of the surroundings. Many streams of socio-cultural life feed into artisanal knowledge, as do economics, religion, politics and other practices (Gajjala, Niranjana & Sayamasundari 2012), therefore, an understanding of artisanal skill, knowledge, raw materials and traditional technology can add depth to the social study of an artisan community and vice versa. Advocating the inter-disciplinary approach, Tim Ingold (2012) argued that material culture scholars and anthropology scholars were 'talking past each other', approaching their respective subjects in isolation rather than understanding the interconnected nature of raw materials and ecology, process, objects and social significance. He identified what was missing as the "creativity of the productive processes that bring the

artefacts themselves into being: on the one hand in the generative currents of the materials of which they are made, on the other in the sensory awareness of practitioners” (Ingold 2013: 7). Bringing this inter-disciplinary perspective and attention to raw materials and technique strengthens the exploration of cross-cultural transmission within textile heritage of the *Khasi Bhoi*, the *Karbi* and the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* of the Ri Bhoi District.

Textile tradition across the northeast is defined by locally cultivated natural materials such as cotton, *pat* (mulberry silk), *eri* and *muga* silk, and indigenous fibres such as nettle and bark. With reference to the raw materials used in the textiles discussed in this article, a brief description of *eri* silk and cotton production of the Ri Bhoi District is offered. Although commonly associated with Assamese textiles, *eri* silk is cultivated and used by many artisans across the northeast, defining the regional textile tradition rather than any one particular state or ethnicity. The local and informal term for *eri* silk in the northeast, is the “poor man’s silk” (De & Das 2010, Mahan 2012) which reflects the simple method of cultivation in comparison to mulberry silk or *muga* silk. Any individual can cultivate *eri* silk, simply with access to the castor plants to feed the worms on and an area to dedicate to the worms. This term also conveys the preference of the wealthy clients for a silk with an obvious shine, as opposed to the matt subtle sheen of the soft *eri* silk. Perhaps the term also alludes to the incredible durability of *eri* silk, “the life of one person being seldom sufficient to wear out a garment made of it” (Wardle 1879: 7).

*Eri* silk is a short staple fibre, meaning the cocoon is made up of many short, soft and fluffy strands of silk, rather than the long continuous fibre of mulberry silk cocoon. *Pat*, or mulberry silk has the characteristic ‘silky’ shine due to the long unbroken filament. The only way to loosen the gum that binds the silk cocoon is to boil it, with the silkworm still inside the cocoon. In the case of *eri* silk, when the worm has completed the spinning process, it is either taken out by the artisan tearing open the cocoon, or left to complete metamorphosis, emerging as a moth and continuing the life cycle. As *eri* silk is hand-spun it is of no matter that the cocoon has been broken open, thus saving the worm from being boiled alive<sup>1</sup>. The cocoon is then boiled with soap to loosen the fibres, flattened and layered to form a conical formation of cocoons, from which the artisan will deftly tease out just the right amount of fibre to spin her thread, enough to retain the integrity of the thread, but not too much to spin a thick yarn. The slub, the uneven nature of the yarn is a characteristic of handspun yarn, which the artisan will also control through careful attention to the quantity of fibre she is teasing out.

Cotton cultivation was historically widespread amongst the indigenous communities of NE India, though competition from industrial cotton production and availability of millspun cotton in the markets led to the decline in this practice. Both the *Karbis* and the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* have maintained the practice of cotton cultivation, a tradition that the *Khasi Bhoi* have largely lost, focusing instead on *eri* silk cultivation. In both fibres, the relationship to the raw material is very personal, it is often cultivated by the weaver herself, or her family members. It is a small-scale cultivation, with one or two trees in the compound of the home, carefully collected pods, and through the manual extraction of the seeds before carding the fibre. The transformation from raw cotton or *eri* silk to yarn is one that requires skill, patience and sensitivity from the artisan, with an understanding of the characteristics of the fibre, working in partnership with the raw material to achieve a skilfully handspun yarn. It is a practice that also encourages social interaction between artisans, since it is an activity that women can do while sitting together in their free time, providing a comfortable and familiar space for the sharing of skills.

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1. This process has led to the widespread marketing of *eri* silk as ‘peace silk’, although in many indigenous cultures across the northeast it makes complete sense to sell or eat the worms as a source of additional income/protein which is certainly not peaceful, and is most definitely disturbing the lifecycle of the worm. It can be more aptly termed as an example of a zero-waste lifestyle with a conscious awareness of bi-products from production.





**Figure 3:** The *pla kieng* sling bag of Raid Nongthlulh.

An interesting item has evolved through the recent availability of acrylic yarn. The sling bag known locally as *pla kieng* (figure 3) is used for every woman's essential items - her purse, her mobile phone and her *kwai* (betel nut)! The bags are woven on the floor loom (figure 4), which is able to achieve the thick and robust structure required for bags and the result is a durable, cost-effective bag. It is so widely used that one can argue has now become *tradition* of the Ri Bhoi District. The quote below from Kong Nianda, an artisan of Mawlong village, illustrates the notion of identity of place over identity of ethnicity through the use of this bag.

Everyone knows that we are from Nongtluh because we wear this kind of a bag. Once we reach Shillong, people know that we are from Nongtluh from our bags. We want people to know and identify us that we are from Nongtluh.

(Kong Nianda, personal communication, March 2017)

### *Process and looms*

The traditional method of weaving in Meghalaya is on the floor loom (*thain madan*), a loom that is not typically used in northeastern states. The floor loom (figure 4) is a modest structure made of local bamboo and wood. It is made either by the weaver themselves or another community member. The warp is stretched between two sets of wooden posts pounded into the ground and tensioned by a bamboo or wooden beam at the beginning and end of the warp. The reed (*snad*) is handmade with a thin bamboo at the top and bottom, and the teeth, or the comb of the reed, are thin strips of bamboo, held in place by tightly wound cotton. These are all made locally, but not necessarily by the weavers. The fabrication of these fine bamboo reeds brings other members of the community into the wider artisan network using equally developed craft skills to support the tradition of handloom in the Ri Bhoi and serving a cross-cultural market of weavers from all ethnic groups. The *Khat-ar Lyngdoh*, and the *Khasi Bhoi* traditionally use the floor loom, yet more recently many weavers have shifted to the frame loom or *thain kor* (figure 5) as a result of government interventions to increase productivity of handloom. The frame loom is widely used across India and compared to the floor loom, it can accommodate a longer warp, a wider width and the fly shuttle mechanism enables a faster weaving process. The perspective of modernising loom technology to increase productivity is driven by the recognition of the value of handloom as an important rural livelihood. Technical training, assistance in acquiring looms and capacity building of individuals and Self-Help Groups is given by both the Directorate of Sericulture and Weaving and NGO's, although the approaches of delivery often differ. The frame loom is effective when used in a commercial context, however in the context of textile heritage, it is important to make the association between the diverse qualities of cloth that define the regions textile heritage and the numerous styles of looms traditionally used in NE India.



Figure 4: The floor loom (thain madan)



Figure 5: The frame loom (thain kor)

Karbi artisans both of the hilly areas in Karbi Anglong and the Assamese plains typically weave on a backstrap loom (figure 6). However many *Karbis* in the Ri Bhoi District use the backstrap loom or a modified version of the frame loom, known as the *thain ra*. Figure 8 illustrates the primitive set-up of this loom, while figure 7 illustrates a contemporary *thain ra*. Interestingly some *Karbis* in Plasha also use the floor loom, perhaps having learnt the technique from their *Khasi Bhoi* neighbours.



Figure 6: The backstrap loom of the Karbis



Figure 7: The *thain ra* of the Karbis of Plasha, a modified frame loom with shorter depth.

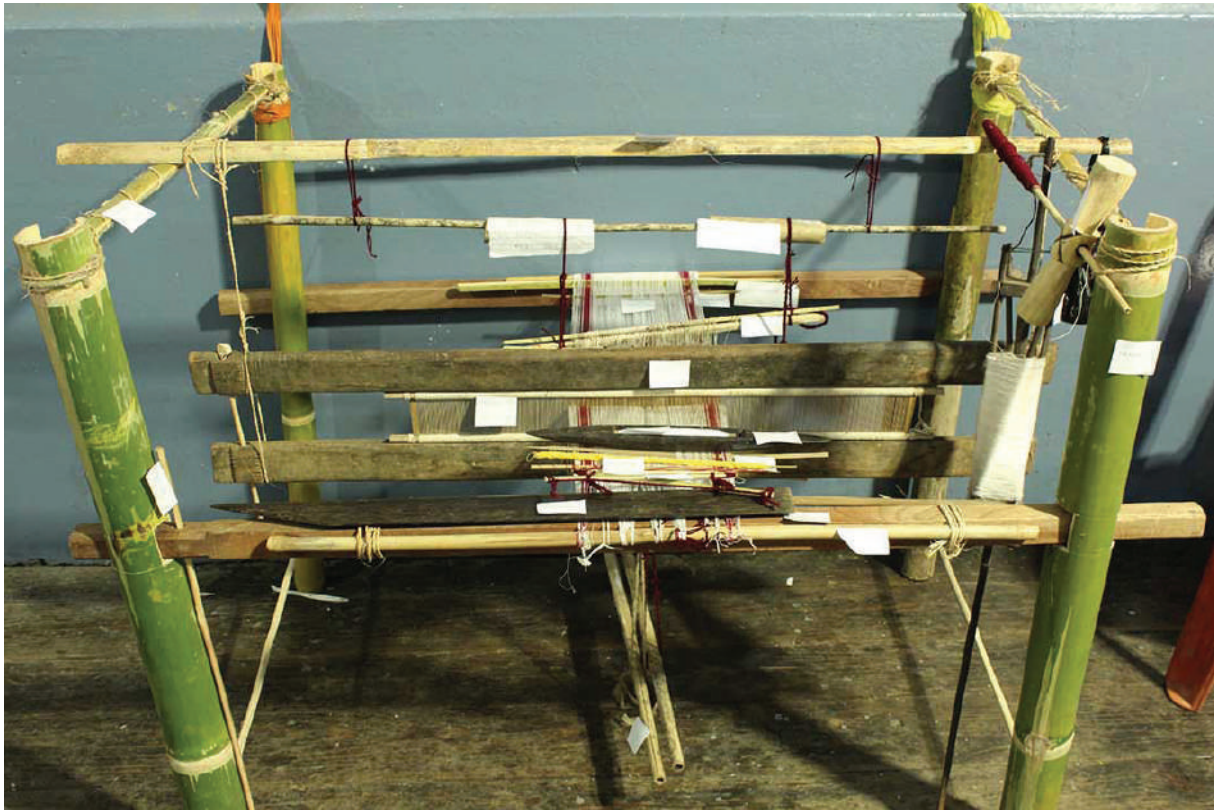


Figure 8: Example of the earlier model of the bamboo frame loom of the Karbis



Figure 9: Picking the supplementary weft design with a smooth wooden sword.

The technique of supplementary weft weaving also differs across the communities. The *Khasi Bhoi* and *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* weavers traditionally pick the design freehand from memory or by replicating an existing sample. It is picked with a *wait*, a smooth sword like stick with a pointed end, with no technical aid to retain the design (figure 9). Often an existing cloth will be used as a template in the reproduction of the motif, this could be a cloth woven by an artisan's mother or grandmother or other family/community members. In the scenario of intermarriage between ethnic communities, using an ancestral cloth as a template can lead to a blurring of textile identity. For example, a *Karbi* woman marrying into a *Khasi Bhoi* family may bring textiles woven by her *Karbi* mother or grandmother into her new family. These will invariably be used as a reference for her future weaving projects - weaving that she will produce within the context of the *Khasi* community.

The *Karbis* have a technique known as *ketur*, of inserting thin bamboo sticks in the warp, allowing the weaver to retain the lifts of the design and then reflect the motif without having to pick the entire sequence again. This technique is typical of *Karbis* who weave on a backstrap loom. A similar manner of using the sticks at the back of the frame loom is a precursor to the drawboy harness typically used by many Assamese weavers, and the *Karbis* of the Ri Bhoi District. The technique has been adopted by many *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* weavers and to some extent the *Khasi Bhoi* weavers in Raid Nongtluh. One *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* artisan described how she observed the technique when visiting friends in the *Karbi* village of Plasha and then tried it out when back at her own loom. This method is now incorporated into her practice. This particular transmission of traditional technology can be termed as a biased transmission of knowledge, guided by an underlying bias of skill, status or success (Boudot & Buckley 2017), in turn influencing other cultural aspects such as clothing and design.

## Textiles of the *Khasi Bhoi*, *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* and *Karbi* of the Ri Bhoi District

### *Garments and dress*

There are many different styles of traditional dress across Meghalaya, varying between ethnic groups and even between villages. The intention here is to focus on the garments of the *Khasi Bhoi*, *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* and the *Karbi* of the Ri Bhoi District to illustrate the cultural assimilation of traditional dress as a visual indicator of the intercultural nature of the district, positioned alongside that of the highland *Khasis* which has perhaps sustained a lower degree of interaction with outside cultures.

Women of all *Khasi* tribes traditionally wear a very simple garment called the *jainsem* - two pieces of untailed cloth pinned on either shoulder. It can be in any cloth, and is worn for all occasions from daily dress to more special occasions. The traditional *Khasi dharra* shown in figure 10 is essentially the same format, although in more formal fabric traditionally reserved for the more wealthy. It is woven in muga/sand-coloured mulberry silk, with the red stripe along the border edge. There is no waistband, headcloth or sarong, their dress is neat, elegant and uncluttered. The more ornate dancers outfit maintains this style of the pinned cloth across one shoulder, draped loosely across the body seen in figure 11. The ornamentation comes in with the jewellery and headdress. The *dharra*, and the traditional *jainsem*, are generally sourced from outside Meghalaya, in particular Sualkuchi of Assam, where the well-established handloom industry caters to the demands of the wider market of ethnic communities across NE India.

The *jainsem*, and the informal *jainkyrshah* (a single length of gingham checked cloth pinned on one shoulder) is worn across Meghalaya, yet in the Ri Bhoi District, one begins to see additional elements to the traditional dress and the use of locally handwoven cloth. Figure 12 shows the handwoven *eri* silk *chappang* cloth, pinned on one shoulder in the style of the *jainkyrshah* and worn over a handwoven sarong. Although rarely worn in this generation, the *chappang* is a traditional handwoven cloth of the *Khasi Bhoi*. The traditional dancers dress, and ceremonial dress shown in figure 13 includes an intricately woven waistband, known as the *thoh pan*, and a length of cloth wrapped around the body and tied above the bust. All ensembles of figures 12 and 13 include *eri* silk cloth, that is cultivated and woven in the Ri Bhoi



**Figure 10:** The Khasi Dharra in pat silk (mulberry silk)



**Figure 11:** The Khasi dancer's dress at the Ka Shad Nongkrem festival



**Figure 12:** The Khasi Bhoi chappang cloth in eri silk



**Figure 13:** The Khasi Bhoi dancer's dress and ceremonial dress, including many items in eri silk



Figures 14 and 15: The Khat-ar Lyngdoh dancers dress and ceremonial dress, woven in cotton and acrylic

District, where the climate is significantly warmer and more conducive to cultivation of the silkworms than the highland areas of Meghalaya.

The *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* have an even more complex aesthetic, with the white and red striped cloth crossed over the bust and secured by the highly decorative *thoh pan* waistband, and the neatly folded cape worn on the head (figures 14 and 15). The *jain pien* tube skirt worn by both girls has a large border of yellow supplementary weft designs on the black ground, typical of the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh jain pien*. There is little presence of *eri* silk in the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* textiles, though far more of locally cultivated and handspun cotton, a practice they still continue. The availability of millspun pre-dyed cotton and synthetic yarns has also greatly influenced the practice of these weavers.

The daily dress of the *Karbhis* of Meghalaya is shown in figure 16. A single length of cloth pinned on one shoulder known as the *pekok* with a matching tube skirt called the *paning* in the dialect of the Ri Bhoi *Karbi* (*pini* in the dialect of *Karbhis* in Karbi Anglong and the plains of Assam). It is worn with a long narrow belt called a *ringkok* in Ri Bhoi *Karbi* (*vamkok* in Karbi Anglong/Assam), which is tied at the waist with intricate handwoven designs (figure 17).



**Figure 16:** The Karbi style of dress of the pekok and paning/pini



**Figure 17:** The ringkok/vamkok belt with geometric motifs



**Figure 18:** The style of dress worn by previous generations of Ri Bhoi Karbis. Nowadays, they will wear a blouse or the pekok and paning as in figure 16.



**Figure 19:** The dancers dress, typical of Assamese Karbi dress



The garments worn by women of previous generations of Ri Bhoi *Karbis* (shown in figure 18) illustrates the same manner of wrapping cloth around the bust as the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh*, tying the sarong with the narrow white cloth belt with supplementary weft designs, not unlike the *thoh pan* of the *Khasi Bhoi* or the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh*. This garment is not typically used in this manner by the *Karbis* living in Assam. The same long, narrow cloth with supplementary woven designs on a red ground is typically used as a man's turban (*pongcho/poho*), or a scarf for either a man or woman. It is held with such respect that it is reserved for wear on the head, and would never be seen tied around the waist. Figure 19 is interesting because it illustrates this manner of wearing this cloth as the *pongcho (poho)* on the head, yet the woman is wearing it around her waist, as is seen in *Khat-ar Lyngdoh & Khasi Bhoi* style of dress, indicating influence of the Ri Bhoi cultures. The red and white *gamusa* however is a clear reference to the influence of Assam. The *gamusa* is a red and white cotton cloth used for ritual, for welcoming guests or VIPs, and for daily use in Assamese homes.

In analysis of the styles of dress presented here, and in relation to each other, the uncluttered style of the highland *Khasi* dress sits in contrast to the complex and layered aesthetic of the Ri Bhoi *Khasi* subtribes. The *thoh pan* is a key component of the *Khasi Bhoi* and *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* style of dress with bold geometric designs woven in complex supplementary weft, worn as part of the ceremonial and dancer's dress. It is a fascinating cloth for ethnographic study, as this item of clothing features in the *Khasi* subtribes of the Ri Bhoi District though most definitely not in the highland *Khasi* attire. The influence of the *Karbi* style of dress on the *Khasi Bhoi* and *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* is clear in the manner of tying cloth on the body and the intricacy of the supplementary weft designs. Yet the *thoh pan* also illustrates that the *Karbis* of the Ri Bhoi District have also been influenced by the neighbouring cultures since in some instances, a similar cloth to the *thoh pan* is used in the same way as their *ringkok* (figure 17) though not by the *Karbis* of either the hills or plains of Assam. The quote below comes from a *Karbi* artisan who acknowledges the relationship of the *Karbi ringkok* to the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh thoh pan*:

“There is a difference between *Karbi* Ri Bhoi and the *Karbi* in Karbi Anglong (Assam). The *Karbi* waist band here is almost the same like the *Khat-ar lyngdoh*. It's the same, the only difference is that we use the red colour one and they use the white colour one.....”

(Kong Risilda, personal communication, March 2017)

It is impossible to say from where the *thoh pan* originated. It could perhaps have evolved from the *Karbi vamkok*, or the *pongcho*, (the man's turban). With the complexity of the supplementary weft motifs, it is unlikely to have originated from the *Khasi* culture. Yet the evolution of this garment to the striking *Khat-ar Lyngdoh thoh pan* shown in figure 14, or the heirloom *Khasi Bhoi thoh pan* in figures 13 and 20, illustrates that a tradition has developed over generations of interaction and exchange. The fact that the *thoh pan* is part of the dancer's attire is key to understanding the transmission of culture of the garment. Festivals are a time when neighbouring communities come together to celebrate with dance, food, and song, a time when culture is shared, appreciated, and organically assimilated. The *thoh pan* tells the story of a multi-directional transmission of culture, of an aesthetic that has found its place firmly in the Ri Bhoi culture, certainly influenced by the skill and aesthetic of the *Karbi* weavers (and in all possibility other communities also such as the Assamese) who had settled in the Ri Bhoi District, but taken to a level where it is unquestionably part of a shared Ri Bhoi culture.

## Significance of design

The supplementary weft designs of the *thoh pan* and handwoven shawls deepen the notion of cultural assimilation and transmission in the Ri Bhoi District, reflecting the social scenarios, or social change of the immediate environments of the artisans. The article explores design interpretations of a few motifs which offer reference to the *Khasi* social structures, the impact of the British missionaries, the impact of ethnic migration and the influence of the physical surroundings of the artisans. While acknowledging that

design interpretation is always subjective, the interpretation of the artisans offers compelling insight into the lifestyle, priorities, beliefs and history of the artisan communities.

The key participant for this research, Kong Thrandar Tmung is a weaver from the *Khasi Bhoi* village of Diwon in Raid Nongthluh. One of the most complex pieces of her heirloom textiles is the *thoh pan* shown in the dancer's costume in figure 13 and figure 20, woven and worn by her grandmother. It is handwoven in handspun *eri* silk, naturally dyed with local indigo for the deep blue. While natural dyeing with lac is widely practiced in the Ri Bhoi District, the red in this sample was dyed using the *jajew* leaf (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*). It is woven on the floor loom, the designs picked manually as it is woven, which will be discussed in the following section. Interestingly, the *absence* of other heirloom *thoh pan* textiles offers as much insight into social change of the area as analysis of the sample itself, since many pieces of traditional clothing, particularly those associated with dance or ritual were destroyed with the conversion to Christianity. The arrival of the missionaries and the Christian faith brought a major change to the social and cultural world of Meghalaya with ethnic communities across the state embracing the Christianity. In the Ri Bhoi District this was during the 1930s-70s, almost a century after the arrival of the missionaries in the Highlands of Meghalaya. Expression of traditional culture was viewed by the missionaries as 'pagan practice' and was discouraged or forbidden. Traditional rituals, dances and celebrations came to an abrupt halt; the textiles and costumes once rendered worthless were sold or discarded.

Kong Thrandar's grandmother retained the *thoh pan* shown in figure 13 when many other similar items were destroyed. As both a dancer and the weaver of such an exquisite piece, perhaps she had a deep attachment to the cloth and could not let go of it. Based on discussions with her grandmother, Kong Thrandar has been able to shed some light her thought process behind the designs. While not common to all *Khasi Bhoi* weavers of the area, the interpretations reflect the artisans' own relationship to the *Khasi* culture and her surroundings. Significantly, and in consideration of earlier discussion, Kong Thrandar's family is an example of intermarriage between a *Karbi* woman and *Khasi Bhoi* man, many generations ago. The family name was previously Timung (a common *Karbi* name) which became Tmung with the transition to the *Khasi* identity. Today, the family firmly identifies as *Khasi Bhoi*, yet the weaving skills of the late grandmother indicate a skill and aesthetic more akin to that of the *Karbi* weavers.

The design marked C is called *Khmat Longsan*. The word *Khmat* translates as 'eyes' into English, and is a common term for many of the designs used by the *Khasi Bhoi* and *Khat-ar Lyngdoh*. The red diamonds in this design represent the heads of the *Longsan*, the clan elders who come together for community meetings. The translation of this name is therefore 'the eyes of the elders'. The direct reference to the *Khasi* culture in the significance of the motif and woven, embedded into her cloth could possibly indicate a conscious or unconscious desire to identify herself as *Khasi*, moving away from a *Karbi* association, or it could equally be an illustration of the depth of respect she had for her community.

The designs marked G and D on the image are called *Khmat Nakhmat* and *Khmat Nadien*, respectively translating as 'the eyes from the front', and 'the eyes from behind'. These designs are a woven interpretation of the bamboo patterns of the decorative door panels at the front and the back of the *syiem lukhimi's* house. The *syiem*, as mentioned in the introduction, is the head of state of a *hima* (a defined geographical area with a number of villages). The *Syiem lukhimi*, loosely translated as the "queen", or "king's mother", is the keeper of culture, the organiser and patron of traditional festivals. These designs reflect the respect for the *lukhimi* and also illustrate the fluid relationship between crafts. Bamboo is plentiful in the northeast and bamboo craft is practiced all across the region. The vertical row of diamonds present in many of these motifs is a representation of the bamboo gate at the entrance to the sacred grove of Raid Nongthluh, where horizontal bamboo poles are inserted into holes in a vertical bamboo. There is always an odd number of diamonds, clearly represented in design F, which according to *Khasi* belief protects a house, place or person from the devil.

The *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* artisans also weave geometric motifs using the supplementary weft technique, more deft in their execution of supplementary weft designs than the current day *Khasi Bhoi* weavers. Interestingly the artisans all use the same names for the designs indicating a collective meaning rather than an individual artisan's interpretation.



Figure 20: The heirloom Khasi Bhoi thoh pan in handspun and naturally dyed eri silk



Figure 21: Khmat Lyngdoh



Figure 22: Khmat Dulong Byrnie

*Khmat Lyngdoh* is a design that represents one of the most important figures in the community- the *Lyngdoh* (priest) who performs the rites and rituals of the indigenous *Khasi* religion. Note the vertical line of nine diamonds separating the motif repeats, in keeping with the *Khasi* belief of protection against the devil with the number nine and three.

*Khmat Dulong Byrnie* is an interesting commentary on the physical surrounding of the weavers. *Dulong Byrnie* is a bridge, originally made of wood that was constructed over three generations ago on the Meghalaya/Assam border. It has long since been replaced with a cement bridge, but this design remains as a tangible indicator of the impact that the construction of the bridge had upon the weaver. The language



Figure 23: Khmat Dkhar



Figure 24: A contemporary Karbi supplementary weft design with similar elements to Khmat Dkhar

of design name itself also indicates a proximity to Assam, since the word *dulong* is used for bridge, rather than the Khasi word *jingkieng*.

*Khmat Dkhar* offers a distinct example of the interaction between the locals and outsiders. The translation of the Khasi word *dkhar* is 'outsider' or 'foreigner', commonly used though today in a derogatory manner. It can be speculated that this design is an interpretation or copy of the textiles that the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* weaver would have seen belonging to other ethnic groups who had settled in the area. A similar motif can be seen in Figure 24, a shawl woven by a *Karbi* artisan. The components of the motif bear significant resemblance to the motif of *Khmat Dkhar*, suggesting a cross-fertilisation of aesthetic or design influence. This particular piece has been woven with the use of the drawboy harness for creating the supplementary weft designs, which results in a slightly more refined or contemporary appearance of the weave.



Figure 25: Khmat Lewi



Figure 26: Supplementary weft designs of the Karbi community, note the small geometry similar to Khmat Lewi.

*Khmat Lewi* of the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* weavers offers further example of the fluid use of design between ethnic communities. The name, *Khmat Lewi* is a direct reference to the craft of weaving. The small diamond shaped eyes of this design represent the eye of the *lewi*, the string heddles of the loom made by hand when setting up the floor loom. This is a design that can be seen in the traditional textiles of many ethnic communities of the northeast region, including the *Karbis*, as shown below in figure 26.

The following three figures are all interpretations of the diamond *khmat* or ‘eye’ design present in *Karbi* textiles (figure 27), *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* textiles (figure 28) and *Khasi Bhoi* (figure 29). These three examples are all artisan heirloom pieces in handspun cotton or *eri* silk, and naturally dyed. The fluid use of motif in these examples highlights the impossibility of defining a distinct line between cultures, between textile heritage of neighbouring communities. The assimilation of culture, or design aesthetic is so organic, gradual and natural amongst creative communities that it does not even seem necessary to define from where it originated.



Figure 27: Supplementary weft motifs from the Karbi textiles



Figure 28: Supplementary weft motifs from the Khat-ar Lyngdoh textiles



Figure 29: Supplementary weft motifs from the Khasi Bhoi textiles



Figure 30: Figurative and geometric motifs of the Karbis



Figure 31: Geometric motifs of the Khasi Bhoi, the middle design bearing resemblance to the green design in figure 30.



The *Karbi* community have a hard-working and productive approach to weaving. In *Karbi* culture, Serdihun is the goddess of weaving - legend has it that she was from the Timung clan. She is understood to be the one who created all the motifs and designs as a template for *Karbi* textile culture. The skills of the *Karbis* in creating complex designs is more advanced than that of the *Khasi Bhoi*, and the design vocabulary is far broader incorporating figurative designs as well as geometric motifs. Motifs like birds, flowers, mythical creatures and human figures are woven into *Karbi* designs, as can be seen in figure 30 where the geometric motifs are accompanied by a figurative design of three birds on a pole. The pole represents *Jambili Athon*, a significant component of *Karbi* ceremonies and the birds represent the unity of the principal clans in the *Karbi* community. Note the similarity of the bottom geometric design in green with the middle design in figure 31, another heirloom piece of the *Khasi Bhoi*.

The absence of such figurative motifs in the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* and *Khasi Bhoi* textiles suggests a cultural decision consciously or subconsciously, on the part of the artisans not to depict birds and animals figuratively, retaining the purity of the geometry in their textile aesthetic.

## Conclusion: A Shared Textile Heritage

What begins to emerge, through the study of textiles is the cross-fertilisation of design, motif, technique and style of garments between communities. While this does not dilute the sense of distinct ethnic communities, there is clearly a certain amount of borrowing between cultures in terms of textiles and material culture. In identifying the significant aspects of textiles relating to the respective ethnic groups of the study, a parallel narrative of co-existence has been revealed, a notion of togetherness brought by geographical location and shared experiences. Over the course of the fieldwork, an intercultural use was observed of the *thoh pan* (decorative waistband), the *jainkyrshah* (gingham check apron), the tube skirt/sarong of the *Karbi* and the *Khat-ar lyngdoh*, the *thohrew stem* (*Khasi* shawl) and the Assamese *gamusa*. I have observed *Karbi* fabrics being woven in *Khasi Bhoi* workshops, *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* fabrics woven in the *Karbi* villages and there is even a stripe design called the *pyrthoh Nongthlulh* (*Nongthlulh stripe*) woven in the *Khat-ar Lyngdoh* and *Karbi* villages beyond Raid Nongthlulh.

Beyond the physicality of material culture, an example of how this convergence of cultures and beliefs is played out is the *Sajer* festival of the Ri Bhoi District. The *Sajer* festival is the traditional harvest festival of the district, it is not a festival of other areas of Meghalaya. Some villages come together to celebrate, while some villages do not engage in celebration, all at the discretion (or dictation) of the church. In Mawlong the Presbyterian Church does not permit celebrations, still abiding by the missionary concept that traditional rituals are pagan to the extent of threatening expulsion from the congregation if someone performs traditional rituals. The Churches of Catholic denomination in the Ri Bhoi District have reached an understanding that indigenous culture and Christianity can exist side by side, permitting the celebration of dance and music, but not the rituals. In the *Karbi* village of Plasha, although Christian, they maintain *Karbi* customs and rituals, even combining elements of indigenous *Khasi* divination rituals through the sacrifice of a cockerel. Multiple systems of religions and cultures are co-existing, multiple ethnic groups are co-existing, interacting and creating an unspoken, multi-lingual discourse (Kharmawphlang, personal communication, Jan 2017). It becomes impossible to separate one tradition from the other as a broader narrative of ethnic identity of the Ri Bhoi District emerges. This is not to say the specificity of local cultures is receding, but rather that one cannot ignore the cross-fertilisation that has been taking place for generations. The ancient migration of communities and the current presence of ethnic communities across these borders creates an ethnic landscape that transcends political borders and creates a localised identity. Stepping back to view textiles and culture of the Ri Bhoi District from a broader perspective is a conscious move away from the colonial approach defining ethnic identity, of compartmentalising tribal groups of NE India. It acknowledges a shared history, centuries of co-existence and the fluid and dynamic nature of culture and traditional practices.

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