

The Transitions in the Identity of the Semsas An observation of the institutions of the Semsas

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Abstract:

The Semsas are one of the five sub-group of the Dimasas (the second largest hill tribe of Assam) who live in Semkhor village in the Dima Hasao district of Assam. Semsas are found to have some peculiar customs and traditions which mark them off from the other groups of the Dimasas. Their religious rites and rituals; birth, marriage and death ceremonies, pattern of family, dance forms, living standards, housing pattern, etc. are distinctive. The traditional self-governing institution, i.e. village council among the Semsas retains its uniqueness. This paper is an attempt to focus on the distinctive social life of the Semsas and to identify the transitions if there be any. The analysis is based on both participant and non-participant observation and secondary sources of information.

Key Concepts: *Semsas, Dimasas, Identity, Transition.*

Nothing in this universe is static. Transition is universal and it leaves nothing in the universe untouched. Human civilization has also undergone several stages of evolution from the stage of savages to reach the present stage. But the pace of transition in human society is different in different parts of the globe. The concept of identity is both trans-historical and trans-cultural. That means it is historically contingent and socially constructed. Socially constructed means peoples' sense of themselves as distinct individuals is labeled by the society. Hogg and Abrams termed identity as "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (1988, 2). The very word people's concept indicates identity as social construction. Again, Deng defines identity "to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (1995, 1). That is, bases of identity are race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture. James D. Fearon says (1999) "identity" means either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and allegedly characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) a socially distinguishing feature that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or, of course, both (a) and (b) at once)." As the concept of identity is trans-historical and socially constructed identity of a group or community changes over time.

For the purpose of the present paper, transition is defined as a process of change from one form or condition to another. Therefore, to trace the transition in the identity of a group or a community it is essential to examine the elements of culture and tradition of the group or community. An observation of the processes of change of the basic institutions of a community from earlier form or condition is helpful in understanding the transitions in the identity of the community. Hence this paper makes an attempt to throw some lights on the transitions in the

identity of the Semsas in the Dima Hasao district of Assam basing on the changes in the five basic institutions of society, viz., family, marriage, religion, economy and polity. The analysis is based on secondary sources of information and primary sources of data through personal observation and field survey.

The Semsas are the group of people within the Dimasas (the second largest hill tribe of Assam) who live a distinct social life from the other Dimasas in the village Semkhor in the Dima Hasao district of Assam. The Dimasas are classified into five according to their place of inhabitation; such as – DIJUASA- (Dhansiri valley of Nagaland and Karbi Anglong district of Assam), DEMBRASA (Kolong Kapili valley of Hojai and Karbi Anglong district of Assam), HASAUSA (Dima Hasao districts of Assam), HAWARSA or Barmans (Barak valley of south Assam) and SEMSA (Semkhor village in the Dima Hasao district of Assam). With the variation in the place of inhabitation, there is a little variation in language, culture, social customs and traditions among the above-mentioned classification of the Dimasa. And in particular the Semsas are found to have some peculiar customs and traditions which mark them off from the other groups of Dimasas.

About the Village Semkhor:

Semkhor is one of the oldest villages in the district of Dima Hasao. The village might be established during the second half of the Sixteenth Century. After the destruction of the capital of the Dimasa Kingdom at Dimapur in 1536 AD, the King Nirbhaynarayana and his kinsmen fled from Dimapur towards south searching for a suitable place for establishing his capital. He halted at Phrasadindik, Bongkhai and Semkhor before establishing his capital at Maibang in 1576. Regarding the migration of Dimasas to Dima Hasao, Tonmoy Bhattacharjee writes, "Up to the middle of the 16th century, they had a kingdom at Dimapur (now in Nagaland). But the expanding Ahom kingdom soon came into fierce conflict with complacent Dimasa and finally their capital was ravaged by the Ahoms in 1536. They, for a long time, remained as refugees in the wild vastness of central Assam but their "route to security" was in the south to which they laid siege some decades after." (Bhattacharjee 1993: 60). Again P.C. Sarma writes "By A.D. 1536, Dimapur, the capital of the Dimasa, was sacked by the Ahom army upon which the Dimasa king had to desert the Dhansiri basin and shift their capital deep in to the uninhabited and lofty terrains of North Cachar Hills" (Sarma: 2003:9).

When the king discovered Maibang, the place which has natural boundaries by the surrounding hills, he left a few of his brave soldiers called PhongloDaogah, LangthasaDaogah, HaflongbarDaogah, ThaosenDaogah (Also the King clan at that time) and SengyungDaogah to guard the border of the Kingdom at Semkhor. For this reason it is assumed that the village was established before the king established his capital at Maibang in 1576 AD. Maibang, the second capital of Dimasa Kingdom developed and cultural legacy it had sustained from its earlier times was maintained rigidly. Maibang continued to be the capital of Dimasa Kingdom till 1705 A.D. when the Ahom again destroyed the capital of Dimasa Kingdom at Maibang and compelled the Dimasa king to move to Khaspur of Cachar Plains. But the Semsas continued to remain at Semkhor without much communication with the outer world. Thus, the Semsas live a peculiar life unlike the other Dimasas.

The Semkhor village is situated in the hills of Barail range. It covers an area of 406 hectares and lies between 93°15' E latitude and 25 °20' N and 25°15' 27" N longitude. The village is bounded by hills and rivers from all sides. The main rivers of the village is the Langting, which has many tributaries, such as Seling, Phara, Wami, Samphari, Sakroma, Laikrima, Dimbram etc. (Limbu Dhruba Kumar, 1996:21). The village is at a distance of 29

Km from Maibang, the civil sub divisional town of Dima Hasao district of Assam. A PWD road is there to reach the village but the condition of the road is too bad to drive vehicles. No regular transport communication facility is available to reach the village. On Thursday, i.e., on the weekly market day at Maibang town some vehicles like Tata Mobile run to the village. Sometimes, the government officers and contractors visit by their vehicles by this road. However, the villagers generally use some traditional short cut foot track to reach Maibang town.

The name Semkhor means well of salt (Sem meaning salt and Khor meaning well). There were five natural salt pits in the village. But now there are only three usable salt pits. The villagers said that their forefathers used the saline water of the pits for cooking purposes. These pits are considered as holy in the life of the Semsas and some worshippings are required to be observed at these pits and the females are not allowed to enter the boundary of the location of the pits. They believe that some diseases like gastric ulcer, goiter, and blood related ailments can be cured by the salt water of the pits. Only the Zonthai (Priest) belonging to Phonglo clan can take water for such purposes after performing a worshipping in the name of the deity (Mongrang) of the pits by sacrificing a hen or a pair of pigeon.

For overcrowding in the original Semkhor village five new villages have emerged from the original village. Hence the number of household and total population of the original Semkhor village has decreased recently. But the newly constructed five villages also maintain the same socio-cultural life of the original village. At present Semkhor village has about 110 households with a total population of about 410 including the households of the single lived widows whose number was 11 during the field visit. The village is bounded by hills on all sides and consequently they still maintain a relative cultural isolation from the Dimasas.

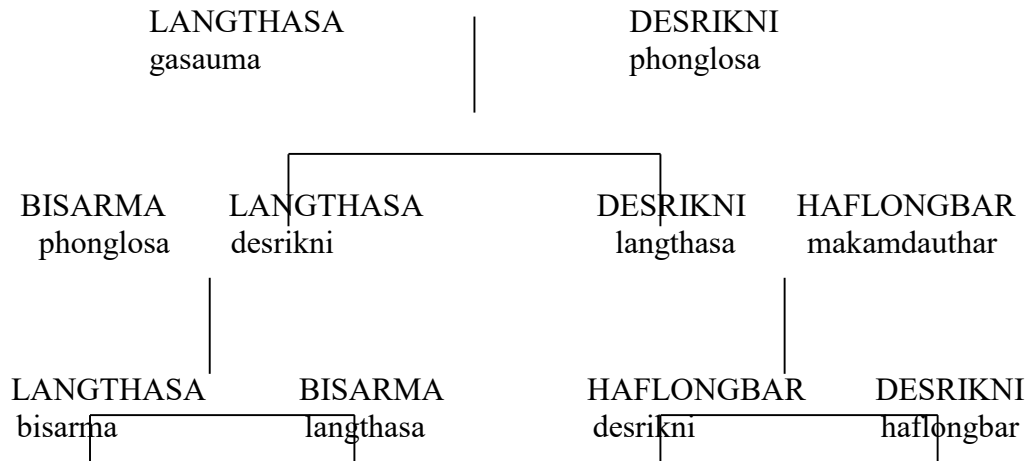
Marriage:

A distinctive feature the Dimasa tribe in general is the existence of double descent system. "In India, double descent is found only among the Toda tribe of Nilgiri Hills and Dimasa tribe of North-East India." (Singh & Paul 2001:5). The Dimasa have both patrilineal and matrilineal system of descent. Hence, it is a bi-lineal tribe. Every man and woman in the Dimasa tribe bears allegiance to two clans. A boy and a girl inherit the respective patrilineal clan and matrilineal clan of their father and mother. Again, a father and a son belong to the same patrilineal clan but they belong to two different matrilineal clans as the father inherits his secondary affiliation from his maternal grandmother while the son inherits from his own maternal grandmother. It is because clan exogamy in terms of patrilineal clan and matrilineal clan is strictly maintained in Dimasa tribe. However, after marriage women's patrilineal clan is changed to her husband's one through a ceremony which they call KHELHABRIBA. There are altogether forty patrilineal clans (Sengphong) and forty two matrilineal clans (Julu or Jilik) among the Dimasas. The Semsas belong to five patrilineal clans, viz. Langthasa, Phonglo, Haflonbar, Thaosen and Sengyung and 22 matrilineal clans. "The Semsas having some matri lineal clan names that resemble Naga words, the Dimasa think of a possible marital relationship between the Semsas and the Naga in remote past and avoid them for matrimonial purposes. In fact, the village of Semkhor where the Semsas inhabit is closer to Naga settlements than Dimasa settlement" (Danda 1984:414).

In terms of marriage, in addition to the general Dimasa traditions, the Semsas follow village endogamy which is not found among the other Dimasas. However, marriage among inhabitants of the other the five new villages established by the inhabitants of Semkhor village is not a taboo. If any male or female marries outside these villages,

he or she is not allowed to reside permanently in the villages. But they can make visits to the villages to take part in religious rituals and/or as guests. So far about ten males and five females have violated this village endogamy and they reside in the towns of Haflong, Maibang and Langting.

The Clan Exogamy among the Dimasas can be presented as follows: -



(NOTE: BLOCK capitals signify the primary affiliation and the small letters the secondary affiliation)

* Source: Danda, D.G. (1984) in ‘Tribes of North – East India, Kerotemprel, S. (ed) Calcutta; Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. P. 420-421.

The model here shows the clan exogamy form of marriage among the Dimasas as well as the Semsas. From the model it is clear that cross – cousin marriage is possible in the Dimasa society. However, no record of the same is found among the Dimasas.

Clan exogamy and village endogamy are strictly followed among the Semsas. And the violation of tribe endogamy leads to ex-communication from the society.

Marriage through negotiation is the prevailing practice among the Semsas. The Semsas marry at a much younger age. Child marriage is unknown to the Semsas. But it is observed that almost all the males and females at the age of twenty years are married.

Monogamy is the traditional practice among the Semsas. Yet a second wife could be accepted only if no child was born out of the first marriage.

There is the prevalence of bride price that they call KALTI, which is fixed through negotiation. Actually, at present, it is followed only in the name of custom and not as the price of the bride because it is observed that no huge amount of money is paid for the same.

The custom of MINHABA is followed among the Semsas. This is the custom of living with one’s parents or parents-in-law for one year after marriage. And no sooner the period of this custom is over the Sema married couple lives in a new house. As the Semasas follow village endogamy, the newly married couple generally spends the MINHABA at the boy’s father’s home. But the other Dimasas generally spend this period at the house of the parents of the girl.

Divorce is rare among the Semsas. Pre-marital sex relations are a taboo. If it happens accidentally, the village council headed by Khunang (Gaonburha) penalizes the accused with a fine, which must be paid to the society. If the girl becomes pregnant due to the said relation the boy is forced to marry the girl. Otherwise he has to pay a fine to the society and compensation to the girl (in the form of money).

Family:

The traditional type of family among the Semsas is nuclear family. It is because of their peculiar rule of residence which restricts the living of two different matrilineal clans under the same roof. For this peculiar rule the widowed mothers are found to live in separate house. At present there are 21 such single lived widow's houses in the village. There are restrictions in the use of same attires, cosmetics including comb by two different matrilineal clans. Therefore, before marriage or during MINHABA the son is supposed to construct his own house. The new house is constructed in one's own patrilineal clan's land. If the land is not available in one's clan, he has to seek permission to construct his house in other clan's land and he has to pay for the same. Although the Semsas family is nuclear, in some cases it is observed that the female kin of wife are given space.

Religion:

The Semsas claim themselves as followers of Hinduism. But the religious practices among them show that they follow animism. There are number of deities for various purposes and sacrificial rituals are must to satisfy the deities. They have the concept of area god also. The area god of Semkhor area is called MONGRANG MADAI. In almost every ritual of the Semsas sacrifice of animals and birds and offering of rice beer called JU is compulsory. The sacrifices of animals and birds, their numbers, size and colours varies from ritual to ritual. In some rituals eggs are also sacrificed.

The Semsas do not offer regular prayers to the deities. They worship on occasions and at the time of necessity only. Only the ZONTHAI (Priest) carry out the verbal communication with the supernatural powers. And that too in a language which is different from the language in ordinary use. The post of ZONTHAI is not hereditary. Anyone interested can learn it from the senior ZONTHAI. Five ZONTHAI for each of the five patrilineal clans are selected by the members of the clans to perform their rituals. This is so because of the fact that some of the rituals are particular to the clans and those can be performed only by the ZONTHAI of the particular clan. The Semsas never worship without a purpose. The purpose of worshipping are ranges from good health, long life, begetting children, acquiring material property, hunting, good crops, satisfying the dead, evil spirits and ghosts.

They believe in the concept of soul. Departing of soul from the body is considered as death. They cremate the dead. They have separate cremation ground for each of the five Patrilineal clans. The village observes GUSU (impurity) till the MAIMUTHARBA (Shraddha ceremony) of the dead is over. MAIMUTHARBA means purification of rice. No other rituals or any merry making takes place in the village until MAIMUTHARBA. MAIMUTHARBA is completed within four days. The family members offer rice beer (JU) and buffalo meat to the village community on the third day. The village women also bring MAIJU (sticky rice) and JU (rice beer) for offering to the dead. After offering to the dead, all the women offer JU to all the people gathered at the MAIMUTHARBA. On the fourth day RAJI THARBA (purification of the village) takes place by showering the DITHAR (holy water prepared by the ZONTHAI by taking water from the salt pits) in each house of the village.

The Semsas believe in rebirth also. After the birth of a child, they try to determine the particular person who is reborn. This determination is called SIMANG NAIBA. There are number of rituals before and after the child birth among the Semsas.

The Semsas make use of divinations to foretell the future, to find out the necessity to perform certain rituals, to determine in the newborn baby as to who is reborn, to find out the reason of sickness, to see the future of the village in a particular calendar year etc.

Economy:

The Semsas are rice eaters. Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Semsas. They primarily practice shifting cultivation in the hill slopes where besides the principal crop paddy; the staple food; they also cultivate other crops and vegetables as mixed crops. Among other crops sesame, maize and cotton are of worth mentioning. There is no individual ownership of land holdings of shifting cultivation. The ownership is community ownership. They are not self-sufficient in food grain production. In the little plains available within the hills and valleys of the rivers they practice settled cultivation also. Besides this, animal husbandry and poultry farming is also their secondary occupation. Among the animals they rear buffaloes, pigs and goats. And among birds they rear ducks, hens and pigeons. All these they rear for sacrificing in the rituals. They even do not milk the buffaloes. Those are for tilling land of settled cultivation and for community feast. Apart from their agricultural product they also collect honey bee, wild vegetables, roots and tubers from the jungle. They also hunt wild birds and animals like pigs and deer. Despite of all these they suffer from shortage of food.

Some of the Semsas have the expertness in handicrafts. They make different types of baskets that they call LONGKHAI, DIKHANGKHA, KHAMPLU, MAIJAI, KHAUJEB etc. They come to weekly market at Maibang to sell those baskets and some agricultural products of the shifting cultivation and to buy the consumer articles from the market.

Semsa women are expert in hand looms. They also rear silk worms called YUNGMA (Eri). By tracing threads from the cocoons of Eri they weave Eri Chaddars (scurf) both for males and females. The worms within the cocoon are eaten with rice. There are only six government servicemen in the village at present. One of them is the teacher in the LP School in the village and the rest are grade IV employees. In general, they are not economically well off.

Polity:

Like other Dimasa villages Semkhor is having a village council. But the village council of Semkhor is the most extended one and constituted strictly on the democratic principles except in the case that female members are not included in it. However, when women are involved in any judicial trial, the elderly women are also invited to participate in the trial. The village council is respected by one and all in the village. It settles disputes (of inter-family, intra-family, inter-village, etc.), tries cases of thefts, incest, elopements on the basis of conventions and the judgments delivered are binding. All disputes of the village are settled amicably. This organization has both executive and judicial functions. The executive functions are organizing any celebrations in the village. The Judicial functions include the settling of inter-personal, inter-family, inter-village disputes.

As regards the traditional type of village council Dipali G. Danda writes: “The traditional type of village organization has become obsolete except in Semkhor, the oldest and the most conservative Dimasa village. (Danda, D, 1977: 99). The following different kinds of officers are holding various positions in the power structure of that village.

Table 15

Political Structure

Designation of Officers	Number of Positions
Khunang or gaonburha	1
Dilek or assistant gaonburha	1
Daulathu	15
Habaisagao	2
Pharai	2
Mantri	8
Hangseobukhu	25
Jalairao	Unlimited

Source: Danda, D, 1977: 99

Therefore, it is necessary that such a well structured traditional council should be utilized by giving more powers and functions that can be performed at the grass root level. The functions of the council should not be limited to settling of disputes and trial cases and observing community feasts and festivals. But this should have the supervisory power over any govt. plans and programmes for village development.

Apart from the political activities through this village council, the villagers’ full participation in the universal adult franchise in the general election to the Parliament of India, Legislative Assembly of Assam and North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council is encouraging. But the service that is to be received from the public representatives is not encouraging so far. No Member of Parliament has ever visited the village. The MLA rarely visits the village after getting elected. However, the elected members of the Autonomous Council visit the village occasionally. But pitiable condition of the overall development of the Semkhor area does not reveal the eagerness of the public representatives to bring about development of the village.

Conclusion:

It is observed that the transition in the identity of the Semsas in terms of the five basic institutions of the society is almost static. The changing processes in different spheres of activities of modern India have been going into the socio-cultural systems of all the tribes but not the Semsas in the district of Dima Hasao in Assam. Keeping aside the other developmental programmes of the government, the universalization of elementary education is failed in case of this village. In the Dima Hasao District of Assam, the majority tribe, the Dimasa is given Autonomous District Council along with other native tribes of the district since 1952. This has surely helped in bringing about social change in the Dimasa society in the district but not the Semsas. And the most important of all is the access to modernity which include expansion of education; development of means of transport and communication; expansion of different mass media like newspapers, periodicals, radio, television etc and the latest of all is the expansion of information technology through mobile phones, internet etc. could have brought about development among the

Semas. But till today they have to come to Maibang which is 29 Km away from Semkhor to avail education after class V. All the children of the village between age group 6 to 10 are not enrolled in the Primary school in the village. The road communication to the village is just somehow motorable for some particular vehicles only. Newspapers, periodicals, radio, television, mobile phones, internet etc. are unknown to the general Semsas. No power connectivity to village Semkhor is available as of now. Amidst all these difficulties, the Semsas are retaining their indigenous culture and traditions. The original Semkhor village and the five new villages formed out of the original village are following the same age-old traditions in their social life.

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