



Tools of Tradition: Material Culture in Hmar Shifting Cultivation of Assam

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Abstract

The tribes of Assam widely practice jhum cultivation, and the Hmar tribes of Assam are no exception. They have practiced it since ancient times, making it an important aspect of their lives. In their jhum fields, they cultivate various crops ranging from vegetables to rice. Known for their rich oral traditions, the Hmars use specific tools in their jhum fields. These tools hold great cultural significance in their lives. The Hmars craft these tools themselves, which not only assist them in jhum cultivation but also reflect their cultural heritage. As a tribe that pass down knowledge to the next generation, they also transmit the art of making these tools and its usage to the next generation. This article intends to showcase the importance of this tools in Hmar shifting cultivation, thereby highlighting their rich culture and the pressing need to preserve them in the face of modern technologies within the framework of material culture.

Keywords: Hmar, Material Culture, Shifting cultivation, Tools, Assam

Introduction

The Hmar tribe, one of the Indigenous communities of Northeast India, resides across several states including Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, and Meghalaya. They belong to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman language family, which is part of the larger Mongoloid linguistic group. The Hmars trace their origin to *Sinlung*, a place believed to be located somewhere in China. Since they do not have written records, the community relies on oral tradition to preserve and transmit their history. This oral transmission, passed down through generations, has made the Hmars especially rich in oral culture. During their time in Shan, they acquired the art of blacksmithing. One such narrative recounts that after settling in *Sinlung*, the Hmars migrated to *Shan* state in present-day Myanmar. During their time in *Shan*, they acquired the art of blacksmithing. Songate (1995) states that, “*Tuthlaw le Hreipui siem hmasatak chu Lungtau hnam annih. Chun Shana hin PUMBUK (Thir sutna in) an nei bawk a; chuchu PUMBUK hmasa tak anih. Hih upa titi anih*” (p.84). This passage means that the Lungtau sub-clan of the Hmars were the first to forge a hoe and an axe. They developed these tools during their settlement in Shan, where they also built a blacksmithing house—regarded as the first of its kind—according to elders’ accounts. This reflects not only their adaptability but also their progressiveness during their stay in Shan, traits the Hmars continue to uphold to this day.

Traditionally, the Hmar people engage in shifting cultivation, primarily practicing slash-and-burn (Jhum) cultivation. Shifting cultivation is a traditional farming method where people clear a piece of land (usually by slashing and burning), grow crops on it for a few years, and then move to a new area once the soil loses fertility, allowing the previous plot to regenerate naturally. Besides Jhum cultivation, their livelihood also depends on farming, hunting, and related activities. The Hmar people cultivate various crops seasonally in their Jhum using traditional tools crafted by themselves. This deep engagement with handmade tools highlights their richness in material culture. Their agricultural tools—typically made from bamboo, wood, and iron—play a crucial role in their daily lives. The Hmars design and produce these tools at home, often utilising natural resources or available materials. For generations, they have used these tools to sustain their agricultural practices, passing this knowledge and craftsmanship from one generation to the next. Despite the pressures of modernisation, many of these traditional tools continue to be used today, although some have faced challenges due to changing technologies and lifestyles. According to the Barak Valley Hill Tribes Development Council (2007), 36,684 people speak the Hmar language, spread across 99 villages and 5,216 households.

The concept of material culture: Material culture, as defined by various scholars, highlights the importance of objects in shaping human life and society. Miller (1998) argued that material culture is significant because the things people make and use help shape the way we live and interact. He emphasizes that objects are not just reflections of society; they actually help create it. Instead of only studying people or ideas, he believes we should also look closely at everyday objects, because they can tell us a lot about culture that we might otherwise miss (p.3). Similarly, Woodward (2007) describes material culture as the physical objects people use, interact with, and experience in their daily lives. He explains that these objects are not just things we use—they also influence how we live, relate to others, and express meaning. People act on these objects, and the objects, in turn, affect people (p.3). Basu and Basu (1975) take a more functionalist approach, defining material culture as the tools and technologies humans use to extract necessities—such as food, clothing, and shelter—from their environment. According to them, material culture includes all objects created and used for human survival and development (p.4). Applying these definitions to the Hmars of Assam, we see that their agricultural material culture plays a central role in their daily lives and socio-economic structure. The Hmars, traditionally practicing Jhum (shifting) cultivation, have developed a range of Indigenous tools such as the *chem*, *Chemtuthlaw* (a dao), *Tuthlaw* (a hoe), *Kâwite* (a sickle), *Hreipui* (an axe), *Kati* (a basket), *Sum* (wooden mortar), *Fahrel* (wooden pestles), *Leidâr* (a sieve), *Tuiûm* (bamboo tubes), *Rîngkawl* (a yoke), *Kâwngphui le Hnam* (a closely woven basket), *Pâipêr te* (a small flat basket), suited to the hilly terrain and their subsistence lifestyle. These tools are not just utilitarian objects; they carry cultural meanings and environmental adaptation.

Objective of the Study

1. To identify and highlight the traditional agricultural jhum tools used by the Hmar tribe.
2. To describe the structure, function, and significance of various agricultural tools used by the Hmars in Assam.

Research Questions

1. What types of traditional agricultural tools are used by the Hmar tribe in Assam?
2. What are the specific features and functions of these agricultural tools?

Methodology

I collected primary data by directly participating in the agricultural practices of Hmar cultivators in the villages of Cachar district, Assam. I engaged with community members, observed their use of traditional tools, and documented their cultivation methods to understand the cultural significance of their material practices. I also gathered secondary data by consulting various published books. These materials helped me frame the historical context of Hmar material culture within shifting cultivation. To support my research with visual documentation, I visited the Mizoram State Museum, Aizawl, Assam State Museum, Guwahati, and Haflong District Museum, where I photographed traditional agricultural tools and cultural artefacts relevant to the Hmar community.

Material Culture in Practice: Tools of Shifting Cultivation

The practice of shifting cultivation among the Hmars is deeply embedded in their traditional knowledge systems and material culture. Over generations, the Hmar people have developed and preserved a range of agricultural tools specifically suited to the terrain and demands of Jhum cultivation. Following are some of the agricultural tools used by the Hmars along with the pictures, uses and its cultural significance in their daily Jhum practices.

1. *Chem* (a Dao)

The Hmars use the term *Chem* to refer to a Dao. There are two types of Dao. The first, called *Chemkawi*, has a curved blade and can be used by anyone. The second, known as *Chemtak*, is designed mainly for left-handed users. However, out of the two, the Hmars use *Chemkawi* more widely than *Chemtak*. Every Hmar village has a skilled-blacksmiths, who craft it from iron and good-quality wood collected from the jungle. They forge the iron blade of the Dao so sharp that it can cut anything, from large logs to small twigs.

Uses: The Hmar people use the Dao to clear the jungle. As a tribe that relies on jhum cultivation, they cannot imagine life without it. They usually clear the forest between December and February. During this period, they use the *Chem* to clear the land for growing crops. They cut trees and bamboo with it, and besides clearing forests, they also use it to chop vegetables, firewood, and other necessities. It can be used by both male and female people. Its sharp edge allows them to perform both agricultural and domestic tasks with ease.



Chemkawi



Chemtak

2. **Hreipui** (an axe),

The Hmars also used *Hreipui*, known as an axe. They forge its iron blade in a rectangular shape with a sharp edge suitable for cutting large trees. They make the handle from long, thick bamboo or good-quality wood to ensure durability and proper grip for felling huge trees.

Uses: In earlier times, when they cleared the forest for jhum cultivation, men used the axe to cut trees that the Dao could not handle. For this reason, they always crafted the handle from strong, high-quality wood.



Hreipui

3. **Chemtuthlaw** (a type of dao or bill-hook)

The Hmars also use *Chemtuthlaw*, a type of Dao usually crafted from a straight Dao. They curve its blade so it can effectively clear grasses in the jhum. They make the blade from iron and the handle from wood. It is mostly used by the womenfolk working in the jhum.

Uses: After the crop is grown in the jhum, certain grasses start sprouting and hinder the crops growth. In such cases, they use this curved Dao to remove the unwanted grass from the jhum so that the crops can grow smoothly.



Chemtuthlaw

4. *Tuthlaw* (a hoe)

The Hmars also use *Tuthlaw*, known as a hoe. They make its cone-shaped blade from iron and its slightly long handle from wood. Both men and women use it while working in the jhum.

Uses: *Tuthlaw* plays an important role in jhum cultivation. They begin sowing rice seeds, vegetable seeds, and various other crop seeds in the month of March, and they widely use *Tuthlaw* for this purpose. Besides sowing seeds, they also use it to clear grasses. Thus, it serves multiple purposes for the Hmar people working in the jhum.



Tuthlaw

5. *Kâwite* (a sickle)

The Hmars also use *Kâwite*, known as a sickle, as an important agricultural tool in shifting cultivation. They made its blade from iron, shaping it in a zigzag pattern, and attach a small wooden handle.

Uses: When the rice ripens in the jhum fields, the Hmar people do not use an ordinary dao to harvest it. Instead, they use the *Kâwite* because its sharp, zigzag blade allows them to cut rice easily and quickly. Both men and women use this tool. Besides harvesting rice, they also use it to cut yam leaves.

*Kâwite*

6. ***Kati*** (a basket used for measuring paddy)

The Hmars use *Kati*, a basket-like container, to measure paddy rice. They make *Kati* from bamboo and cane- the main basket structure from bamboo and the round upper rim from cane, shaped like a lid.

Uses: When the rice in the jhum ripens and they harvest it, the Hmars measure its quantity using *Kati*. One basket of *Kati* equals one *Kati*. This traditional system of measurement is still practiced today among the Hmar tribes. They measure their annual rice yield in *Kati* and say, for example, "I have 300 *Kati*." Twenty *Kati* equal one mound. Therefore, *Kati* plays a very important role in the shifting cultivation of the Hmars.

*Kati*

7. ***Sum*** (wooden mortar), ***Fahrel*** (wooden pestle),

The Hmars use *Sum* and *Fahrel*, a wooden mortar and a wooden pestle. They craft both from good-quality wood collected from deep forests, as the tools need to last for a very long time. *Sum* has a goblet-like structure with a flared top, while *Fahrel* is a long cylindrical wooden stick with a slightly rounded handle for an easy grip.

Uses: Every Hmar household keeps a wooden mortar and pestle because these are the traditional tools for grinding rice. They place rice or grain in the *Sum* and pound them with the *Fahrel* to separate the husk from the grain. Before the invention of rice mills, the Hmars relied entirely on these tools for hulling and pounding rice and grains. Even today, despite the availability of machines, many Hmar villages still use *Sum* and *Fahrel*.

*Sum**Fahrel*

8. *Leidâr* (a Bamboo Tray/Sieve)

The Hmar use *Leidâr*, also known as a large bamboo tray, as a woven plate for winnowing rice. They tightly weave bamboo without leaving any holes and made the round upper rim with cane to make it strong and easy to handle.

Uses: The main purpose of *Leidâr* is to winnow husked rice and separate unwanted unhusked grains from the cleaned rice. After winnowing, they grind the remaining unhusked rice again in the *Sum* and *Fahrel*, then winnow it once more in the *Leidâr*. They repeat this process until the rice becomes ready to eat. Women usually use *Leidâr* because winnowing requires skill and expertise.

*Leidâr*

9. *Vâirawk* (a sieve made of bamboo having so many holes in it),

The Hmar people craft *Vâirawk* using good-quality bamboo, shaping it into a round form and plaiting its edges with cane. They skilfully weave it to create many small holes that allow them to separate husked grains from broken pieces.

Uses: They use *Vâirawk* to sift *Si* (sesamum), removing seeds from withered leaves and litter. They also use it to separate husked rice grains from smaller broken fragments. It performs this task more effectively than the *Leidâr*.



Vâirawk

10. *Tuiûm* (Bamboo Tubes),

The Hmar people make *Tuiûm* from bamboo, shaping it into long, hollow tubes ideal for storing and transporting water.

Uses: Women mainly use *Tuiûm* to carry water in an open basket called *Paikawng* while working in the Jhum. Men also use it for fetching and transporting water, making it a practical tool for daily agricultural and household needs.



Tuiûm

11. *Rîngkawl* (a Wooden Yoke with Bamboo Band)

The Hmars use *Rîngkawl*, also called a wooden yoke with a bamboo band, to carry heavy loads. They make it from wood and bamboo. They cut the wooden yoke into an oval-like shape and carve out the middle part so it can hang around the neck while carrying loads. They plait the bamboo band with strips, making the middle portion slightly broader so it can rest comfortably on the head.

Uses: Men usually use *Rîngkawl* to transport heavy items. After harvesting in the jhum fields, they use *Rîngkawl* along with *Pâikâwng* (Longkhai) to carry vegetables and rice back home. This tool makes transporting produce much easier to the Hmar people.

*Rîngkawl**Rîngkawl le Pâikâwng*

12. *Kâwngphui Pâikâwng le Hnam* (A Cone-Shaped Basket with Plaited Band)

The Hmars use *Kâwngphui Pâikâwng* and *Hnam*- a cone-shaped basket and plaited band, also called Longkhai to carrying loads. They plait *Kâwngphui Pâikâwng* with bamboo and tightened the upper rim with cane. *Hnam* is a plaited bamboo band that they tie to the Longkhai to secure and carry heavy loads.

Uses: Both men and women use it to carry harvested vegetables and rice on their backs from the jhum fields. The size of the Longkhai varies from large to small, depending on the need of the people.

*Kâwngphui Pâikâwng**Hnam*

13. *Kâwngvâr Pâikâwng le Hnam* (A cone-shaped basket with a plaited band of strips)

Just like *Kâwngphui Pâikâwng*, the male counterparts of the Hmars weave *Kâwngvâr Pâikâwng* as another kind of Longkhai using bamboo and cane. Unlike *Kâwngphui*, they plait this Longkhai instead of making it concrete. It has a cone-like shape with plaited holes made of bamboo, while the upper part, which is wider, is made of cane.

Uses: Both Hmar men and women use *Kâwngvâr Pâikâwng*. They carry large vegetables such as melon, pumpkins, and even firewood in it. However, they usually avoid using it for grains, rice, or sesame because these can fall through the

openings of the basket. When paired with the *Hnam*, *Kâwngvâr Pâikâwng* allows the person to carry heavy loads comfortably and maintain balance.



Kâwngvâr Pâikâwng



Hnam

14. *Pâipêr te* (a Small Flat Basket)

The Hmar people use *Pâipêr te* in the jhum for sowing seeds. They made *Pâipêr te* from bamboo and attach a nylon-like rope for hanging. It has a flat, rectangular shape with a narrow base and serves many purposes in their daily activities.

Uses: *Pâipêr te* is a small yet spacious bag that enables them to store seeds and easily take them out while sowing rice or vegetable seeds in the jhum. They carry this bamboo-made bag, along with its strap, on their back like a backpack, making it an essential tool during the planting season of jhum field.



Pâipêr te

Conclusion

From time immemorial, the Hmar tribes of Assam have maintained a rich material culture, and the traditional tools of shifting cultivation play a vital role in tracing and preserving their cultural history. As a tribe that depends on jhum cultivation for their livelihood, they remained confined to the interior regions where this practice was accessible, unlike other tribes who interact with the outside world. They fully utilized forest products, relying heavily on bamboo and wood to craft almost all their traditional tools. In earlier times, it was customary for each household to have at least one male member skilled in weaving all these tools, as they rarely allowed outsiders to make tools for them. The male member of

the family themselves made essential tools and materials, whether *chem*, *Chemtuthlaw*, *Tuthlaw*, *Kâwite*, *Hreipui*, *Kahi*, *Sum*, *Fahrel*, *Leidâr*, *Tuiûm*, *Rîngkawol*, *Pâikâwng* (*Kâwngphui le Kâwngvâr*) *le Hnam*, *Pâipêr te*, and they then taught this art of weaving to their sons. In this way this art is pass down from generation to generation. Even today, many male members of the Hmar tribes continue to weave these tools and earn an income from their craft. However, these practices are gradually degenerating, and in some villages, we can rarely find these traditional materials. Although the world is moving toward modernization, revisiting the history of our ancestors is essential so that it does not fade away with the changing world. By embodying this idea of using traditional tools to preserve culture and heritage, we can also safeguard traditional knowledge while strengthening the foundation of sustainable shifting cultivation. In this challenging era, working actively towards preserving the culture and safeguarding these small yet significant elements so that modernity does not overshadow is the need of an hour. As Miller and Woodward rightly said, objects do not merely reflect society-they shape it.

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