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IMMANENCE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF ULTIMACY IN THE DIMASA CULTURE OF NORTHEAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Dimasa, a tribal community in Northeast India, enjoy a long and proud heritage. Their creation stories, their celebrations of sacrifices and particularly the thanksgiving festival Bushu/Busu (harvesting festival), and their beliefs about death and afterlife are examined. Their stories, practices, and culture reveal a society that presents a non-dualistic, immanent worldview.

Keywords: Dimasa, Tribal Culture, Animism, Creation, Harvesting Festivals, Afterlife, Immanence

1. INTRODUCTION

LOCATING DIMASAS

The Dimasa people are one of the many tribal communities of the North-East India region. They live, for the most part, in Assam and a sizeable population in Nagaland. In Assam, their highest concentration is in the Dima Hasao District, though significant numbers live outside the district as well such Karbi-Anglong, Cachar and Nagoan. The Dimasas are of Mongoloid stock and belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The Dimasa have different names, and are considered separate tribes by the states of Assam and Nagaland. North of Dima Hasao District are Hojais, or *Dembrasas*; south are the Barmans or *Hawarsas*; east in Nagaland are *Dijuasas.* Hojais and Barmans in general live as caste Hindus.

Like most tribes in the region, the Dimasa have their own distinct language, culture, folklore, traditions, and beliefs. The term 'Dimasa' translates to 'the children of a big river', where 'Di' means water, 'Ma' means big and 'Sa' means children. Written sources and oral narratives recount the history of Dimasa kingdom, highlighting its unique place in the history of North-East India. Dimasa legends also provides insights into their earliest settlements and subsequent migrations in various directions. The Dimasas share the district with other tribal societies. With the separate ethnic movement in Northeast India, there is increasing friction between different tribal communities. Many parts in the region have been subject to an active insurgency. The *Dima Halam Daoga* (DHD), an insurgent group of Dimasa group violently advocated for a separate state, *Dimaraji*, which would include all Dimasas. The DHD have now come to terms with the Indian

government. Despite all of this, most people in the hills live a quiet rural life of subsistence farming, growing upland rice, maize, and vegetables on small plots, going to weekly markets, and raising their families in the small villages that dot the hills.

2. HISTORICAL SETTING

Before any attempt is made to outline the Dimasa worldview, it is important to locate their society historically. The possibility of doing this is relatively unusual for Northeastern tribes: for many, their past is in the domain of folklore. Dimasas are different in this respect: from at least the 9-10th centuries until 1832 C.E., they possessed a kingdom of moderate importance and power in eastern Assam. Long before the establishment of the Ahom state in 1228, the Dimasa kingdom extended over a large area, spanning from the Brahmaputra valley to the valleys of the Dhansiri and Kopili rivers. Untill the sixteenth century, the Dimasa kingdom controlled much of the Dhansiri valley, with Dimapur as its capital. However, over the following centuries, the kingdom gradually receded towards the Maibang hills in the Dima Hasao district in Assam. As such, monuments, coinage, and the accounts of literate neighbors serve as tangible sources of information for their past. The Dimasa kingdom is often mentioned in the *Buranji* (chronicles) of their rivals, the Ahom Kingdom and, later, in the many colonial records.

Like many societies of Northeast India, the Dimasas belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Their own oral stories narrates an early inhabitation of the Brahmaputra Valley, and a slow movement eastward along its shores. This offers one possibility for the origin of the people's name—Dimasa—which means "children of the great river."[i] Dimasa legend claims the people's first home was at the junction of the Brahmaputra. From this origin, the Dimasas moved eastwards. Accepted historical evidence attests to kingdoms centered on these cities, though cannot provide their ethnic composition.[ii]

Later in better documented times specifically 1228 C.E., the Ahoms, migrating westward from northern Myanmar, record the presence of a powerful Dimasa kingdom embracing much of present-day eastern Assam with its capital on the banks of the Dhansari River, at Dimapur in today's state of Nagaland.

The architecture of the remains of in Dimapur is impressive. Certain stone monoliths on the grounds and a much-restored brick gate (fort) reveals Bengali cultural influence in the kingdom even at this early date. This Bengali influence reflects the usual trajectory of cultural interchange in Assam. Hindu Brahmins attached themselves to monarchies of the region, serving as advisors and gaining support for their presence with generous land grants. Such a presence can be assumed at Dimapur, though the lack of any documentation frustrates efforts to determine its magnitude.[iii]

The Ahoms arrived in eastern Assam in 1228 C.E., and soon came into conflict with the established Dimasa state. A series of wars ensued, which resulted in a series of Dimasa defeats and culminating in the destruction of Dimapur in 1536 C.E.[iv] The monarchy survived, moving southwest out of the Dhansari valley to the North Cachar Hills, where at Maibang they established a second capital. This renewed kingdom was considered to be a tributary, protected state by the Ahoms. Dimasa practice in this regard appears to have been pragmatic: paying tribute to the Ahom king when that monarchy was strong, seeking to escape the relationship when it was not. At Maibang, Hindu influence at the court continued to increase. Tales of Brahmin advisors to the king, a change in royal titles from Dimasa names to Hindu names, and remains of Hindu-like temples and a carved dedication to Hindu gods attest to this.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the monarchy gained control of the rich plains of Cachar, located directly south of the hill country. The monarchy soon moved its capital there—farther from the Ahoms, closer to Bengal—and established the third capital at Khaspur. Here Bengali Hindu influence became paramount, leading to the full conversion of king and court to caste Hinduism in 1790.[v] Indeed, the penultimate Dimasa king, Krishna Chandra Narayan, is celebrated even today for his hymns to Hindu deities. While the new territory greatly increased the potential for income for the monarchy, it remained unstable because of political and economic challenges.[vi]

The monarchy finally collapsed in 1830 amidst financial bankruptcy because of the devastation wrought by the Anglo-Burmese War and foreign intrigue from the East India Company.[vii] Even before this end, the Dimasas of the northern hill areas had achieved a tenuous independence under the rebellion of a leading general, Tula Ram Senapati. The cause of the rift between valley and hill Dimasas is obscure: some trace it to Tula Ram's ambitious machinations, others to the marriage of the last king, Govind Chandra Narayan, to his Manipuri sister-in-law, a union that had no precedent in the customs and traditions of the Dimasa people. Quite possibly, the move to independence by the hill Dimasas arose from their realization that king and court had embraced a fundamentally different, completely alien set of values, with little connection to their own traditions. To this day, the Dimasas of the Cachar district of Assam, having renamed themselves

"Barmans," proudly wear their caste threads, center their religious devotion on Hindu temples and shrines, and observe the dietary and other practices of Hinduism.

Like other small societies of northeast India, Dimasa culture has changed slowly through time. Influences from other societies and innovations within Dimasa society have been small and slow. The life of Dimasa people in the past was remarkably well-adapted to their environment. Legends locate explanations for the miseries in life and the alleviation of those misfortunes in the working of divine beings who protect and punish, and elucidate human behaviors towards those deities that will safeguard a good life. Rituals and festivals maintain social connections across a necessarily dispersed, thinly settled slash-and-burn farming culture. Beliefs and practices around death reflect a successful effort to avoid the dread and terror in which death challenges the significance of life.

This attempt to describe Dimasa life and its horizons will center on those three iconic areas. This allows a theoretical structuring of a culture that is, to a great extent, non-analytical. The three areas have been chosen because of their centrality to Dimasa identity and practice. The people's traditional lifestyle and livelihood and the society's clan structure will first be surveyed. Within that context, the varied creation accounts will be examined, along with the resultant approach of Dimasa culture to the place of the gods and meaning of sacrifice. Second, the study will examine *Busu*, the main festival of the culture. Finally, people's beliefs in death and the afterlife will provide a final leg to support some tentative conclusions about ultimate reality and meaning for the Dimasa people.

Dipali Danda has written the sole comprehensive ethnography of the Dimasas almost forty-five years ago. While generally reliable, some of her observations seem inaccurate, either because of mistaken informants, local variations of belief and practice, or cultural change since that time. Indeed, Danda asserts that Dimasa life was even then changing through a more intense encounter with more modern cultures, particularly in exposure to market economy.[viii] Most Dimasas identify themselves as Hindus, but they also have their own gods and goddesses who preside over different local areas. This indigenous belief system, along with its socio-religious institutions, known as '*daikho*' and plays a significant role in their daily rituals. The *daikho* serves as an informal shrine where collective rituals are performed within specific territorial units. This ritual space also strongly heavily features the worship of all evil spirits, particularly during times of cultivation, illness, crisis, and epidemics.

3. CREATION STORIES

According to Dimasa mythology regarding their origins, the Dimasa people believed that the world was initially uninhabited. The Earth was entirely covered in water, enveloped in profound silence and celestial tranquility. Amid this otherworldly silence, two divine beings emerged: a male deity named Bangla Raja and a female deity named Arikidima. The two fell in love and experienced a divine conception.

The myth states that the creator, Bangla Raja, and Arikidima laid seven eggs. From these seven eggs, six gods were born, while the seventh egg produced evil spirits. During times of crisis, sacrifices are performed to appease these spirits. The first egg gave rise to the god Sibarai, the second egg produced Doo Raja, and the remaining four eggs yielded the gods Wah Raja, Gonyung Raja, Brayung Raja, and Hamyadao, respectively. The seventh egg rotted, and it is believed that all the evil spirits emerged from this rotten egg after being smashed by Hamyadao. These spirits are thought to be responsible for diseases, suffering, and other natural calamities.

The Dimasa people worship the six gods as their ancestral deities. In contrast, the evil spirits are honored during agricultural activities, sickness, and epidemics. In Dimasa society, men and women generally have equal rights to participate in religious rites. However, the priesthood, known as jonthai, is reserved for males. The priest (jonthai) conducts most rituals with assistance from individuals known as Gisiya. Additionally, a person called a 'phatri' plays a significant role; this individual is believed to be possessed by a deity and serves as an intermediary between the gods and the people during certain rituals.

In accounts derived from written texts and genealogies drawn by Bengali Brahmins serving at the court of Dimasa kingdom, they follow their first king, Ghatotkucha, son of Bhima and Hidimba of *Mahabharata* fame. Arikhidima and Banglaraja fade into cultic obscurity, as do many of their offspring.

4. RITUALS OF CLAN SACRIFICES.

This same type of protection is provided for the clans in return for the offering to the clan god. Clan *pujas* are very important and elaborate events, but are held quite rarely, usually every five to seven years.

A *phatri* is a medium for a *madai*. A familiar god possesses the *phatri*, making use of his body to communicate directly with people. Accompanied by music and drum, the *phatri* dances until he enters a trance. He then kills a chicken, drinks its blood, and shakes as the *m'dai* enters his body. During this time the *m'dai/phatri* can perform great feats of strength and pain resistance.[ix] The god will then speak to the people who have come for advice, informing them of what the problem is and how best to solve it. For *sengphongs,* this means holding a clan *puja*. Men of the same *jadi* (related through their mothers) might well consult a *phatri* if things do not seem right for their group. They will also be told the reason for the difficulties and to which *m'dai* a *puja* should be made. This role of *phatri* is a charismatic endowment: men are chosen by the gods to be their means of direct communication with the people.

Men of the clan will then gather for the *puja,* led by a *jonthai*, or clan priest. Typically, a *puja* is offered to the main deity of the clan, that deity's family, and, of course, Sibarai. The form of a Dimasa *puja* is that of a meal. On arrival at the location for the ritual, the *jonthai* and his assistant (*dainya*) direct the preparation of cups of woven bamboo and lined with leaves and banana leaves. Small earthen mounds represent the deities. A bamboo structure that marks the area where the sacrifice is offered is constructed by the *jonthai* and *dainya*. When preparations are complete, the *jonthai* and *dainya* place the staples of the Dimasa diet, freshly cooked rice and *dzu* (rice beer) before the deities together with other things they demand, betel nut or bananas, for instance. Livestock, including goats, fowls, and ducks, plays a role in the everyday rituals of the Dimasas and their indigenous religious practices. The Dimasas raise these animals not only for sacrifices to their clan deities but also for domestic consumption and, to some extent, commercial purposes.

There are also *pujas* performed to the clan god for individuals by a person's local family members. These serve as protection for the future, and often include a reading of the entrails of the sacrificed animal to gain some insight into the person's future. Finally, there are a number of smaller *pujas* for domestic situations. An example would be a *puja* for a new home or one done if the rice beer continually comes out sour.

Once again, the utter pragmatism of these interactions is foremost. As Danda concludes, "all the ritualistic performances have a functional utility."[x] A *madai* is offended or perhaps just malicious and the person is attacked physically. The course of action is to uncover the cause and apply the proper remedy. These resemble more business relations rather that events of great devotion. The gods and their *pujas* are taken very seriously, but also seem simply part of life, and the remedy demands no inner contrition or promises, but rather only the proper ritual and the honor implied within the rite to set things right.

5. THE BUSU FESTIVAL

Busu marks the end of the agricultural year, which serves to organize so much of Dimasa culture. Most villages have three *gerbas* each year, (though some two, and a few only one). If there are three, they usually occur before planting, in the middle of the growing season, and after harvest.[xi] The *m'dais* honored in these smaller festivals are specific to each village, but are usually gods with some relationship to rice and other food plants. These are village *pujas*, and their form is similar to other sacrifices. An additional feature is that the village is shut during this time, with warnings posted to outsiders to keep out.

Before the advent of formal educational institutions, the center of Dimasa village life was the boys' dormitory, or *nodrang*. Some time between the ages of 10 and 12, a boy would begin living there until he married. Girls would continue living with the family. The *nodrang* served as the first line of defense if the village were attacked, as a welfare system in that the boys helped older people with work in the *jhum*, and as the main vehicle for cultural transmission.[xii] It was here that the young men would learn various crafts, traditional songs, how to play musical instruments, and, from the old men who would gather at the dormitory in the evenings, the extensive lore of the village and tribe.

With the Dimasa people embracing modern education, children go to schools, often boarding at them. This has more or less eliminated *nodrangs*. The building remains the place where the village council meets. It might be mentioned here that, central as it was to village life, the collapse of the institution of the *nodrang* has presented a grave challenge to village life.

Busu festival is the primary time when the important human relationships—headman and village; children and elders, particularly in the family and clans; friends from the village and friends from afar—are formalized, fêted, and renewed. For three days or a week, people let loose in enjoying themselves and each other. The bounty of the year's harvest is celebrated and enjoyed in great amounts. Dancing together, all night and each night, both represents and deepens the human relationships of the community. For three days at least, in the midst of a demanding and in some ways dangerous existence, life is very good.

The celebration also reflects an ideal of egalitarianism. Wealthy people are expected to contribute generously to the community's celebration by providing a large amount of rice for making beer and feeding the less fortunate. It is not unusual for a well-off person to spend half of his year's income, mostly for rice and meat, for the celebration. In exchange for this generosity, the person gains the great esteem of his fellow villagers.

6. CONCEPT OF DEATH, AFTERLIFE, AND REBIRTH.

Beliefs surrounding death and renewal are complex. Only a few changes have been adopted in recent years. Each person has a spirit, a *bishai*. In most cases, it enlivens people throughout their lives without difficulty. An exception to this general rule is being involved in or witnessing some traumatic event, by which the *bishai* can be trapped at the location of the violent incident. The person who has lost the *bishai* in this way weakens and will eventually die unless a special ceremony is performed to call the spirit back

When death occurs, the *bishai* departs from the body. Immediately after a person's death, the family sacrifices a cock or hen. This bird will eventually lead the departed person's *bishai* to *Dambra*, the place of the dead. In many places, firing a rifle follows the death. Once villagers hear of the death, all work stops and people gather in the house of the dead person to console the family and carry out the funeral rites. The body is washed and dressed in clean clothing; cremation takes place as soon as possible, almost always within 24 hours, because of decay. In the past, the entire *sengphong* was considered unclean for a day and conducted simple rites—a bath and drinking *dithar*—to restore their purity.

People selected by the headman carry the body on a bier to the cremation area, which is always on the far side of a river from the village. Besides the belief that *bishais* cannot cross water, this placement reflects the overall importance of water to an agrarian community. Traditionally, the procession is led by a bamboo frame and baglike cloth in which the *bishai* rides. A woman strings cotton thread or throws rice along the path between the village and place for cremation. This is called *maiokhrai*, a bridge between the dead and living. The pyre is arranged in twelve layers of wood and the corpse's head laid upon it with the head facing west. Ideally, two sons light each side of the pyre, and some calls are made for the ancestors to welcome the dead person's *bishai* at its departure.[xiii] All who have attended are sprinkled with holy water, *dithar*, when leaving the area. When cremation is more or less complete, the frontal bone of the skull is found and buried nearby; the other remains are disposed of in the river.

About a week after the cremation, people gather at the cremation ground and make a small house, a *jara* or *mangkhlong*.[xiv] Some of the individual's possessions might be placed in this structure, which serves as a temporary home for the *bishai*. Family members will come to the *jara* often to offer food and drink; in a similar way, a place is kept for the *bishai* of the person at the family table, with small portions of food put on banana leaf plates and cups for it. They return home and the family of the dead person provides a small feast for the village.

The final episode of the process of death for the family is a ceremony called *maimutharba*, that takes place within a year of the death. At this ceremony, the frontal bone, buried immediately after the cremation, is burned, or perhaps deposited in a Hindu temple, depending on the family's religious leanings. The *mangkhlong* and any contents placed there are burned and the ashes again consigned to the river. A final feast is held for the entire village.

Happily, this somewhat abnormal existence is not the last place for the *bishai*. Eventually the spirit of the person who has died returns to the original family, though his return is not limited in terms of gender or number. A person is thought to have seven *bishais*, the most that can return to following generations. The spirit, now called the *shimang* re-enters life, usually as a grandchild; sometimes as grandchildren. This is, needless to say, quite different from the belief in reincarnation in Brahminical Indian traditions, where the soul maintains integrity. Further, in classic Hindu belief the spirit's return depends on its acquired *karma*, with an evil life punished by assignment as some low creature but a good life rewarded by rebirth as a human being or higher form. Danda found such beliefs among her subjects.[xv] Soon after a birth in the family, the child is taken to a *smanaiba* to discover whose *shimang* is once more embodied in the baby. This is always done on a Thursday, in a ceremony called the *shimang naiba.* This is done to remedy any minor problems the new infant might have; even an untroubled baby will soon become difficult unless the identity of the *shimang* is determined. Upon learning the identity of the newborn, children of the deceased will offer special reverence to the child, making it gifts of money or some possession of the person in the previous life. The directions of the *smanaiba* determine the appropriate gift that expresses thanks for the spirit's previous life and thanks for their return to the family.

Death and return, then, reinforce intense family relationships. An individual's death affects first of all the family, but also the village, which ceases other work until the body is burned and supports the family throughout the period of mourning, particularly in the first week. At one time, the clan to which the person who had died belonged at one time became

ritually impure, and purification had to be undertaken, though this observance seems to be fading for clan members not in the nearby area.

7. CONCLUSION

Dimasa culture is, of course, more quickly changing than ever before as it encounters the larger world. One sign of the strength of their solidarity and the aptness of their world-view is that, unlike many other hill tribes of the North-East, they have to a great extent resisted the advances of Christian missionaries.

How well that world-view can be portable and exist outside of the hill communities, and how well it might be adapted to incorporate the realities of a modern world culture remains a pressing question. As mentioned earlier, Dimasa religious imagination looks towards a utopian origin. Yet the people's strongly monistic view of the cosmos and their place in it seems to offer the possibility of the traditional beliefs continuing to shape meaningful patterns in lives, even lives away from the hills. The worldview also has implications for the Dimasa model of life. People are free to make their own lives. The results of their choices provide either feast or hardships. The world to which they will return in a future generation is the world they make in the present, a world in which the pragmatic gods accompany and provide assistance but are unable to fundamentally change. One returns always to the same existence, even the same family. It is in this existence only that joy and meaning can be found.

The lives of Dimasa people are changing. Parents, hoping for an better and easier life for their children, now send them to school and these children's lives are far less saturated with the traditional Dimasa imaginary. What replaces that worldview remains unknown; what supersedes it will determine how this unique way of life embraces the wider world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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