

TRANSMUTATIVE VISUAL CULTURE OF FOLK FESTIVALS : A study and exploration of 'Magh Bihu'

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Abstract: Folk festivals in India are related to agriculture and productivity. The social manners, customs, habits etc. are the principle elements with which these festivals are integrated. In Assam, Bihu serves as the most important marker of cultural assimilation that unites various indigenous groups and all such diverse constituents of Assamese nationality. It is a unified form of the folk songs, dances, musical instruments of the various castes, sub-castes and tribes of people, the natives of Assam. As a form of performing art, folk festivals have always been an important part of culture and community life. Historically and traditionally rooted in an indigenous culture, it provides sites for meaningful social connectivity and exchange. In present times, the celebration of folk festivals like Bihu has taken a new dimension leading to the emergence of new vocabularies of celebration veering towards public design. These festivals have taken a particular artistic and designer profile that exhibit the influences of various cultural elements. This study was undertaken to explore and understand the anatomy of this newly configured popular display of cultural elements that has given rise to new vocabularies in Design and Visual Culture in an Urban/Rural setting. This provides a new dimension for Design thinking in Visual Culture where the vernacular practices of art and craft are brought into dialogue with the transmutating needs of modern cultural demands. It further leads one to analyze and observe how the artifacts associated with a folk festival reinterpret their symbolic meanings through various inter and intra cultural interactions over time.

Keywords: *Local identities, Local cultural heritage, Creative design process, Art Technology and Visual Culture*

1. Introduction

Bihu is a festival connected with the seasonal and agricultural cycle and is an integral part of the Assamese cultural pattern. There are three Bihus celebrated at different times of the year- the Bohag or Rongali Bihu celebrated in spring, the Kati or Kongali Bihu celebrated in autumn, and the Magh or Bhogali Bihu celebrated after the harvesting season i.e. in winter. The Magh Bihu is akin to the Makar Sankranti festival observed by the people of other states of India. This harvest festival celebrated in Assam is also dedicated to the Hindu fire God, Lord Agni. On the eve of Magh Bihu, Uruka, a special temporary temple like structure called Meji is made out of bamboo, thatch and leaves. Makeshift huts called Bhelaghar made of bamboo and haystacks are built by the men folk near the Meji to spend the night. After preparing and enjoying a feast inside the Bhelaghar, men spend the night there and in the early hours of the next morning light the bhelaghar down. Its ashes are then spread to the fields and the trees to bring luck for a better harvesting in future. Magh Bihu indicates the gathering in of the harvest. This festival fosters social interactions through community fishing, community hunting, community feasts (or communal feasts). Apart from that, various games and recreations such as egg-fighting, buffalo fighting, bird-fighting and so forth are an important aspect of Magh Bihu.

Festivals are crucial in facilitating social interaction and also strengthening the identity of the group by bringing it together. Clifford Geertz says that one motivation for participating in festivals is social interaction, festival strengthens the identity of the group by bringing it together; the messages of festival reflect the shared experience of the group, it communicates about the particular society while telling a story which people tell themselves about themselves

(Geertz, 1973). According to Victor Turner, ceremonial artifacts carry rich metaphoric meanings; the past is symbolically portrayed through dominant sacred symbols in celebratory rituals. These symbols stand for many thoughts at once: they are multivocal, speaking in many ways at once; multivalent, having various meanings or values; and polysemous, having or being open to several or many meanings (Turner 1982). A festival thus provides new ways of seeing these identities grounded in performative festivals.[1]

2. Background

In the transition from agrarian to post-modern forms of economy the folk festivals have lost the significance as symbolic enactments of agrarian rituals and feasts. With migration, immigration, the society is no longer a one-dimensional domain. It has led to the concept of Multiculturalism. Multiculturalism suggests a human being who belongs to the larger global community. Assam, situated on the North east of India, is an amalgamation of diversified cultures and have been at the receiving end of both inter cultural and intra cultural influences. With the advent of globalisation, new cultural elements have emerged which shape the common way of life of communities leading to Multiculturalism. Even though Assam comprises of various tribes such as the Bodos, Deories, Hajongs, Kacharis, Karbis, Mishings, Morans, etc, each tribe varies in their cultural composition with overlapping in some aspects. Here comes the concept of Interculturality which explores the Cohesive Correlation between these various tribes. In the face of Multicultural dimensions and Globalisation, there is this growing desire for ethnic recognition in individuals and groups, a search for ethnic identity, and a conscious exhibition of distinctive ethnic traits. Communities seek to reassert their identities in the face of a feeling of cultural dislocation brought about by rapid structural change, social mobility and globalization processes. Identity is created through a process of socialization. Our families teach us about our familial, gender, racial, religious, ethnic and national identities and roles. Our peers reinforce group social norms. Our primary and secondary education reinforces the dominant social identity ideals and roles while our higher education teaches us our work and professional identities and roles. The media reinforces dominant social ideals and constructs new realities while at the same time it creates new social ideals such as consumerism. In the flurry of such influences on the identity of this festival of Bihu, certain cultural elements have transformed and emerged which provides new area for Visual Culture to foray into.

3. Methodology

The site of ethnographic study considered was the folk festivals celebrated in Assam, mainly focusing on Magh Bihu. A semi-urban setting was taken as the backdrop to understand the transmutating character of the Visual Culture of Magh Bihu. This urban-rural setup offered an opportunity to understand the various inter and intra cultural interactions that take place during a festival. Bhelaghars have emerged into the character of Public Installation Design as contrast to its earlier site of social interaction. From the small huts, these Bhela ghars have grown both in size and popularity as the media plays an important role in promoting them. As an onlooker puts it in his observations, in the year 2014, they made a Bhelaghar nearly 40 ft high consisting of five floors and because of its uniqueness instead of burning it down the next morning, it was retained for a week as the village saw many visitors from the nearby villages and town. This year encouraged by the enthusiasm of the spectators last year, the makers of this Bhelaghar added

another floor which made it approx 44ft high .And if it was not enough they made another small Bhelaghar right behind this and attached both the ghars by a bamboo bridge. Apart from the gigantic proportions of the Bhelaghars, the villagers came up with the idea of installations depicting the social activities that they partake during Bihu. This included scenes portraying bird fighting, bull fighting and some other global elements such as a helicopter, a bird perching on a globe.The transmuted cultural influence on the Visual Culture of Bihu is an undoubted fact. The ethnographic studies considered demonstrate this well.

4. Analysis

Symbolism is an important aspect of Visual culture. In Assam, Symbolism is an ancient cultural practice which is still very important for the people. Tamulpan, Xorai, Japi and Gamosa are four important symbolic elements in Assamese culture. Tamulpan (the areca nut and betel leaves) is considered as the offer of devotion, respect and friendship. It is an ancient tradition and is being followed since time-immemorial with roots in the aboriginal Austroasiatic culture.

| | Artifact | Image | Traditional usage | Image | Contemporary usage |
|----|----------|---|---|--|--|
| 1. | Japi |  | Worn on the head as a protection against the elements (sun and rain). Offered as a sign of respect in felicitation ceremonies. Placed as decorative items in and around the house (especially near the front door as a welcome sign). There is a style of Bihu dance with Japi. A symbol representing Assam. |  | Although Japi is a traditional and historical craft of Assam, now days craft person, artisans, different artists across Assam have tried to imitate & explore the Japi fro traditional Bamboo craft to other materials like Bel Metal, Brass metal, Assamese traditional Jewellery in Japi form, in Assamese Traditional Textiles like , Hand woven traditional Towel 'Gamosa' is also in various Mekhala Chadaris made in loom. |
| 2. | Gamosa |  | Used daily to wipe the body after a bath (an act of purification). It is used by the farmer as a swastcloth (ongali) or a loincloth (surya). Bihu dancer wraps it around the head with a fluffy knot. It is hung around the neck; at the prayer hall and was thrown over the shoulder in the past to signify social status. Guests are welcomed with the offering of a gamosa and tamar (betel nut) and elders are offered gamosas (bihuwasa) during Bihu. It is used to cover the altar at the prayer hall or cover the scriptures. An object of reverence is never placed on the bare ground, but always on a gamosa. One can therefore, very well say, that the gamosa symbolizes the life and culture of Assam. |  | Gamosa is now available in various motifs and are mostly machine made. They have found their usage in other forms such as scarves, tops, etc. |
| 3. | Xorai |  | Xorai, a traditional symbol of Assam, is a manufactured bell-metal object and an article of great respect. It is used as a container-medium while performing respectful offerings. As an offering tray for tamar-pan(betel nuts and betel leaves) to guests as a sign of welcome and thanks. As an offering tray for food and other items placed in front of the altar(namaghar)for blessing by the Lord. As a decorative symbol in traditional functions such as during Bihu dances. As a gift to a person of honour during celebrations. |  | With the advent of the global market new usage of the traditional Xorai has emerged. Some of them include Fridge magnets, Bamboo Xorai, Gateway design, etc. |

Figure 1 : Comparative study of symbolic artifacts used in Bihu in traditional and contemporary context.



Figure 2,3,4,5: Various installations depicting Cock fight and Buffalo fight which are an integral part of Magh Bihu celebrations have been observed as an emerging new Cultural phenomena where the local people/ artisans tried their hand at creativity. Media has a big role to play here as these celebrations are aired on local channels for people to watch and various competitions are held to determine the best 'design' of Bhela ghar and these installations. Figure 6,7: Different types of Bhela Ghar observed during the Magh bihu celebrations across Nagaon.





Figure 8: Bhela Ghar inspired by the traditional Japi was observed during the Magh bihu celebrations across Nagaon.



Figure 9,10,11,12: Different Bihu Melas (fairs) have started cropping up all over the city during Bihu celebrations. Apart from selling traditional bihu snack items, they also provide a sneak peek into what the material culture of various tribes of Assam. These melas are playing their part in educating and making people aware of their culture and lost traditions. Some of them on the other hand include joyrides on pony and kite festival which traditionally are not the essential elements of bihu celebrations. This is seen as an impact of cultural exchanges.



Figure 13,14 : Bihu Mela which has acquired the character of exhibition depicting various lifestyles of the tribes of Assam.

5. Conclusion

Globalisation has brought forth a sea worth change of new vocabularies such as Multiculturalism and Interculturality. Design is foraying into these new domains with the intention of exploring new paths for innovations. With globalisation, these folk festivals are transmutating into new identities of Visual Culture. This will hopefully help the broader domain of Design research to understand the concerns of identity, sustainability and material culture of the artifacts of these idigenous people.

Further intensive studies need to be carried out in other cultural dimensions and the observations analyzed pertaining to design. The changes observed should be well documented and a common vocabulary of Design can be explored. This can help the artisans to bring about a new dimension to their work. A new wave of Visual Culture can emerge which will allow us new ways of seeing these identities grounded in performative festivals.

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