



A Few Notes on the Ritual Geography of the Dimasa

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A FEW NOTES ON THE RITUAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE DIMASA

Ramirez Philippe

This paper is a preliminary report on my work on the socio-religious institutions of the Dimasa, particularly on the collective rituals organized on the basis of specific territorial units called *daikho*. The data are mainly drawn from a short fieldwork in North Cachar Hills in November 2002 and the writer has been benefited by the kind assistance of Sarvajit Thaosen, Snigdha Hasnu and A K Langthasa. J K Thaosen, J L Thaosen, N K Bhatari, Anoda Jidung and Bhadreswor Bodo provided the bulk of our data. Published sources on the *daikho* system can be found in the two monographs on the Dimasa by Danda (1978) and Bordoloi (1987). Bhattacharjee (1991) and Barman (1992) provide useful complements in the domain of history.

I won't make any interpretative attempt here, but content myself with putting together what we know on the subject, and underline the main questions, which remain open. Statements about particular aspects of the *daikho* may vary greatly from one informant to the other, reflecting a dynamic situation where the localization and functions of the institution experienced recent changes. Another hurdle is that the priests in charge of *daikho* ritual, the *jonthai*, in order to be preserved from impurity, live in isolation and seem reluctant to meet non-Dimasa. So information on their activities can be obtained only from third informants.

What is a *daikho*? General statements

Danda (126-127) stated that the whole of Dimasa country is under the authority of *ara-goda* who have "non-structured sanctuaries" in different localities have called *daikho*. The area-god controls the life of the villagers who live in its area. Elsewhere, Danda mentions "presiding deities" of the *daikho*; this would refer to the fact (not reported by Danda) that each *daikho* shelters several gods under a "presiding" one, which generally gives its name to the *daikho*.

Bordoloi (43) wrote that the Dimasa kingdom (XIII-XIXth century) was divided into 12 units, *daikhos*, sheltering a deity, and a priest, *jonthai*.

All informants who met recently in the North Cachar Hills described the *daikho* as a sanctuary of a local deity where collective rituals are held on a clan or all-Dimasa basis. The idea that a *daikho* corresponds to a defined area and /or to an ancient administrative arrangement was not strongly asserted, although there is the feeling that the system is an ancient one, dating back to the Dimasa kings.

Different etymologies of the word *daikho* were suggested: the most popular one is "god" + "house", i.e. "sanctuary" (Q the usual word for "house" being *noh*, the exact meaning of *kho* has to be specified). Another one understands "*dai*" as "fine" and "*kho*" as "container": this would point to an administrative or judicial function of the *daikho*, which is confirmed by certain informants stating that formerly, offenders could be purified and punished only in the *daikho* to which they belonged.

It has to be noted that the District Council itself had recently (Q when was it exactly?) gave a verdict on the meaning of "*daikho*" in order to settle cases related to the performance or rituals: it stated that *daikho* means "house of god". (Q this has to be checked properly)

Pantheon of the Dimasa

Dimasa rituals are characterized by the absence of idols and permanent sanctuaries. Gods have no fixed abode, although they may have a territory of their own; they come to temporary altars to receive their offerings. Only dangerous spirits are supposed to stay permanently in certain locations. In the *daikho* or in houses, tutelary deities (*jarne mdai*: "own god") are not featured in a visible form. They are given offerings in leaf plates, each plate dedicated to a particular deity having a specific shape (stitched in a certain manner) and offered through specific gestures (position of hand and fingers).

Gods are also identified by certain features and functions: *Mishim*, for example ("the black animal"), is associated with rain and clouds, and invoked against droughts. In the case of territorial and house deities, their identity is also perceptible by the taboos that their followers have to observe: prohibition of certain foods, of certain ornaments, of certain colours. As such, followers of "the black animal" are not allowed to wear any black clothes: on the contrary, the priest has to be dressed in black while propitiating *Mishim*.

In each *daikho* there seems to be a hierarchy between a major deity and several minor deities. As an example, *Alu daikho* and *Reao daikho* are "presided" respectively by *Alu raja* and *Naikhuraja*, but also inhabited by *Du raja*, *Nandi raja* / *Wang raja*, *Tong raja*, *Nobarai raja*, *Homagarayon raja*.

Number and location of daikho and associated deities

Danda (128) gave the following list for the twelve *daikhos*:

(*daikho* / deity / priest's clan / place)

-*Alu* / *Aluraja* / *Daulagopo* / confluence Mahur-Diyung

-*Baiglai* / unknown / *Langthasa* / interior of *Hajadisa*

-*Hamri* / unknown / *Thaosan* / *Diyung* valley

-*Haor* / unknown / unknown / *Silchar*

-*Longmailai* / *Longmailai* (god of paddy) / unknown / *Haflong* area

-*Manja* / *Gunyung braiyung* / *Thaosan*, *Adao* / *Langting*

-*Misim* / *Misimraja* / *Daliyasa* / *Dhansiri* valley

-*Mongrang* / *Mongrang* (god of war) / *Batari* / *Maibang*

-*Ranchandi* / Unknown / *Thaosan* / *Mahur*

-*Riao* / *Naikhuraja* / *Phonglosa* / *Haflong*, *Maibang*, *Mahur*

-*Waibra* / Unknown / *Diphusa* / *Lanka*

-*Woa* / *Woaraja* / *Khemprai* / whole *Dimasa* territory

This list has to be taken with care, for several reasons given below. It can be accepted as reflecting the views of Danda's informants (mainly in *Karbi Anglong* district) at a particular date (mid-seventies).

Firstly, Danda herself mentions that other *daikhos* have existed, being abandoned at the time of her survey: *Demra*, *Rengma*, *Dijoa*, *Gisia et Damdi*, in the *Hojai* (*Nagaon*), *Diphu* and *Dimapur* areas. When the *Dimasa* left these areas, they abandoned the *daikho* and since then carefully avoid visiting them.

This points to the impermanence and mobility of the *daikhos*. For instance, a few years ago, when the *jonthai* of *Alu raja* had to move his home, he demanded that *Alu daikho* be shifted from *Mahulbra* to his new residence, near *Nagaland* border, which provoked the anger of *Alu* followers. (Q how this case was settled?)

Furthermore, although most of our informants stated that there are twelve *daikhos*, they could produce only the name of a couple of *daikhos* close to their residence. Actually, according to some informants, the number of *daikhos* where rituals actually take place has been reduced to three: *Alu daikho*, *Mongaram daikho*, *Mishim daikho*.

The division of *Dimasa* territory into twelve *daikhos* does not seem to be supported by mythology. The founding myth of the *Dimasa* relates the burying of seven eggs by the original ancestors. In the version reproduced by Danda (126-127), which differs from the ones we collected, six of the seven eggs laid down by the original mother gave birth to the six main tutelary deities of the *Dimasa*: *Shivray*, *Aluraja*, *Naikhuraja*, *Woaraja*, *Gunyung*, *Braiyung*, and *Hamiadao*. Four of these are in Danda's list of *daikho*, "*Shivray*" being the paramount deity. It has to be explained how the six became twelve. Although the history of clan and territorial segmentations may give clues (see below), no oral tradition accounts for this.

Functions of the daikho, the rituals

The rituals performed at *daikho* consist mainly in sacrifices (*shengba*), i.e. animal sacrifices (*mishengba*); human sacrifices (*Bandai yaungloshengba* or *Bandai basain*) have disappeared.

(Q how is the sacrifice done, i.e. how is the animal killed?)

Clan sacrifices performed in each *daikho* are distinguished from the general all-*Dimasa* sacrifice, *muluk jang mishengba*. All-*Dimasa* sacrifices were performed in times of crisis (epidemic, war). Today, in *North Cachar* they are supposed to be performed every five years, or more when funds are lacking. Similarly, clan or area-wise rituals do not take place at regular intervals (Danda mentions yearly rituals).

During the ritual, one mound of earth is build for each deity. Around it, smaller mounds are made to feature its wife and children (Danda 127).

The main tools used are the sacrificial sword (*seng*) and the bell. Sacrificial animals consist of pigs, goats and fowls.

Rituals are financed on a voluntary basis by the participants and, in recent days, by the District Council. According to Danda, each house dependent on a *daikho* has to send one member to the annual ritual. Women do not normally take part in these rituals.

The *daikho* territorial layout

Any attempt to rebuild the *daikho* complex as a system comes up against the definition of the *daikho* itself: is it a definite area, a localized sanctuary, or a movable ritual apparatus attached to a group of followers? The same question can be asked from the point of view of the *daikho* gods: regional gods, centred gods (similar to rulers) or tutelary / clan gods?

Danda had the same difficulty in describing the system. Following her survey, she viewed the *daikho* as sanctuaries and *daikho* gods as former clan gods who become "area-gods". She noted that the territory of a *daikho* is sometimes designated as a *khel*: *Alukhel*, *Manjakhel*.... (127). Whether these *khels* have something to do with the local guilds of the Bengali administrative system or not, *daikho* would be in this pattern the ritual centre of a territory under the authority of certain gods. As a matter of fact, when people migrate to a new residence, they propitiate the local tutelary deity (Danda, 127). But it seems that a choice remains, as Danda specifies that such migrants may also make offerings in the former *daikho*. This suggests that the link between devotees and the *daikho* is not only based on residence. We will in the next part give some data on the clan dimension of *daikho* rituals.

Although not confirmed by other sources, an informant described the twelve *daikho* as being divided into two moieties. According to him, after the disappearance of the Hedamba kingdom, *Alu* and *Reao daikho* became "great *daikho*" (*daikhoma*) and the remaining ten were distributed between two units. This seems to have been the result of a competition for the control over the ritual system, formerly centralized around the Dimasa state. Two pretenders would have emerged for the post of *jonthaima* (great priest) and the whole system would have been divided into two independent units, each under the authority of a different *jonthaima* and performing the great sacrifices separately and at a different date. That a conflict has occurred between *Alu* and *Reao daikho*s is confirmed by the following narrative, reported by another informant: the priests of *Alu* and *Reao* were brothers-in-law. As they walked in a forest, one of them was thirsty. The other deceitfully fetched water with the carapace of a crab, an impure animal, and gave it to his brother-in-law. The polluted priest afterwards pledged that he wouldn't visit the other's *daikho* anymore.

However, the fact that a dual division exists among the *daikho* was not confirmed by other informants.

Daikho and clan: data and hypothesis

The clan is obviously an essential element of the *daikho* system.

Our materials from North Cachar suggest, in contrast with Danda's data, that the worship of *daikho* gods is a clan affair (Q how the different clans are represented in the all-Dimasa *mishengba*?).

Each Dimasa patriclan (*sengphong*) is under the protection of a main and several minor tutelary deities: they are referred simply as "own gods" (*jarne mdai*). The general feature today in North Cachar is that all the male members of a local clan segment regularly (every 1 to 5 years) gather in a *daikho* and sacrifice to their deities under the supervision of the *daikho* priest, the *jonthai*. This sacrifice is essential in the identity of the patriclan: the Dimasa term for patriclan, *sengphong*, means actually "those who hold the sacrificial sword". Each patriclan owns one such sword, which will be used for the sacrifices offered to its tutelary gods. All households of the clan segment financially contribute to the ritual. After the sacrifice, each household will receive a bamboo container filled with *dithar* (Q different from *ditto* = bamboo pot?), purifying water mixed with pigeon blood and *tulsi* (basil), which will be drunk by all members of the household.

The data we collected correspond more or less with the "official description" as found on the District's website: "A *Daikho* has a presiding deity with a definite territorial jurisdiction and a distinct group of followers known as *Khel*. Every Dimasa Kachari family worships its ancestral deity once a year before sowing the next paddy. It is known as *Madai Kheimba*. This is done for the general welfare of the family. And *Misengba* is for the good of the whole community."

The relation between these clan rituals and the geography of *daikho* is not easy to clarify in all details. Danda had perceived this difficulty but focused on the territorial feature of the *daikho*: *daikho* gods would be "area gods". She suggested that the system was clanic in the past but that afterwards, due to migrations, localities became multi-clanic, so that different clans living in the same area were regrouped under the authority of a single "area god" (127-128).

The data we collected in North Cachar do not fit in such a model.

It seems that the general principle of the system, as it appears today in North Cachar, is indeed clanic. How to reconcile this with the obvious spatial basis of the *daikho* division and with the examples reported by Danda of locality-based rituals? This problem has to be considered with a diachronic/historical point of view. On this point Danda was right. My hypothesis is the following. The two decisive evolutions have been the vanishing of the Dimasa State and the de-localization of clans (weaker bonds to the soil and migrations).

In ancient times, the Dimasa clans were concentrated within a limited area and attached to village lands, on which *Jhum* parcels were allocated. They were, moreover, attached to the deities inhabiting these lands. This link may have had two origins: either the clans brought the deities with them in their early migrations and installed them on their new settlements; in this case, clan deities became localized. Or they adopted as clan deities the local (wild) deities they found, asking them for protection and the right to colonize the new land. At that time, villages and areas were either mono-clanic or demographically dominated by a particular clan, possibly the founder clan. Village headmen and priests emanated from this clan. This situation was either established by the Hedamba state or consolidated by the State: the dominant clan was entrusted with the administrative charges (justice, taxes, order) and ritual charges on one of the 12 territorial units. Economic monopoly may also have been given on a clan basis. (It seems that salt mining in particular played a central role: in Semkhor, there would have been 7 "salt-holes" corresponding to 7 clans; this has to be a future track of research). And it has to be remembered that the clans were one of the pillars of the Dimasa state: the king was elected and assisted by the council of the 40 patrilines, the *mel* (Bhattacharjee, 11). However that may have been, there was at that time a spatial coincidence between the ritual organization and the clanic organization. Some remains of this coincidence subsist till today: according to Bordoloi (43), the village headman (*kunang*) has to propitiate the founder clan's tutelary deity annually. (Q have you heard about this?)

With the disappearance of the Dimasa kings, and then the shift from a purely agrarian economy to a diversified one, the population started to scatter, particularly the dominant clans, which had been associated to the former state. In this new situation, the society

faced several problems of adaptation, particularly concerning clan solidarity (multiplication of local clan segments) and ritual organization – two domains, which are closely related. As the distance grew between new residences and original cult places, two main options were available: either keeping the same clan deities and the link with the original *daikho*, or adopting the local deities and being incorporated into the *daikho* of the new settlement. Semkhor village, which in many ways looks like an isolated microcosm of the Dimasa country, adopted a very typical solution, with different clans worshipping their own deities separately in distinct sanctuaries, but all of them in the outskirts of the village (Danda, 127).

(Q: do different segments of the same clan (except Thaosen) worship in the same *daikho* at different dates?).

If this hypothesis is confirmed, i.e. if originally the *daikho* gods were indistinctly both clan-gods and area-gods, it will enable us to understand that the apparent incoherence in the present *daikho* system pertains to different forms of adaptation. The system would be in processes of evolution, and to be more precise, of several parallel evolutions. Consequently, the actual practices, as well as the discourse by which people describe them, fluctuate between the two major poles of clan and locality, i.e., in the anthropological jargon: descent and residence. In the North Cachar it is the clan, which tends to dominate, whereas in certain areas of Karbi Anglong, the spatial factor seems to have overcome.

Obviously, the historical scenario of the *daikho* evolution will have to be explored. It has to be noted that, concerning Barak valley, Bhattacharjee (16) mentioned that new area brought under use by settlers were known as *raj*, Cachar valley being afterwards called the "*Dash raj*". And when the *raj* grew in size and population, it was divided into *khel*. (Q Bordoloi (41) speaks of villages as *raji*. Do you have any idea about this?)

Similarly, comparison with neighbouring groups, like the Tiwas and the Karbi, may help to understand the complex relationships among clans, territories, religion and political systems in the Northeast. For example, among the Tiwas, several families (*bangsa*) formed a *khel* having its own priest, and several *khels* were under the authority of a petty raja.

The study of village rituals among the Dimasa has also to be carried on, because it adds a degree of complexity. We only superficially inquired about the *gerba*, i.e. lustration rites. They seem to be a very important instance where a particular space is defined and revitalized by purification.

The *jonthai* priest

The rules presiding over the selection of the priests officiating in *daikho*, the *jonthai*, and the taboos imposed on them, shed some light on the *daikho* system. Although, according to the same taboos, it was not possible for us to directly interview the priests, we could gather some basic data.

The priestly structure of the Dimasa is still centralized. Theoretically, a *gisia* and a *jonthaima* are found at the top. Both are selected out of particular clans by a council, the *calis* (Q does it correspond to the 40 *sengphong*? If not, who sits in the *calis*?). They were formally nominated by the king according to signs revealed in dreams. The *gisia* is responsible for the supervision of the whole ritual organization: he guides the *jonthai* and performs purification through sacrifice and sprinkling sacred water, but he does not perform the *daikho* rituals himself. The *gisia* is said to be seven days older than god, thus immune from impurity. The *jonthaima* is the officiating priest of all Dimasa rituals (*muluk jang mishengba*) and, according to certain informants, plays also a role of supervisor of the *jonthai*.

It is not clear whether the *jonthais* are directly selected by the *gisia* (as stated by Bordoloi, 43) or if he only sanctions a choice made by the priestly or follower clans. Thus, the Bodo clan, which some time ago had difficulties finding a new *jonthai*, had to consult its deity through a phatri medium. What is clear is that in each *daikho*, the *jonthai* has to be selected from a particular clan. Beyond this clan, the criteria for recruiting a *jonthai* pertain less to his ability than to his bodily integrity, according to certain concepts that would be interesting to explore in the future: having all his teeth, not having been injured by a cat or dog, not being beaten by his wife... Similarly, once in charge, the *jonthai* is compelled by several rules of life, which we can interpret as pertaining to the maintenance of his purity. In *Mishim daikho*, for instance, the *jonthai*, who is selected from the Bodo clan, must live in a village headed by a Bodo *kunang* (the *kunang* is responsible for certain tasks related to the *daikho*, like

keeping the ritual implements). The *jonthai* lives in an area of the village preserved from all kind of impurities, like the presence of pigs, dogs... He has to be careful not to be affected by worms (*jungnamba*) and, it seems, by all kind of infections. He cannot cut his hair or nails and cannot use soap.

As a general rule, seven days before the sacrifice *mishengba*, the *jonthai* cannot accept food from anybody.

The fact, reported by some informants, that the *jonthai* of a *daikho* cannot visit another *daikho* may be also linked to the maintenance of purity; but this will have to be explored further on.

We could not till now gather information on the details of what the *jonthai* does during the rituals; we only know that he does not himself sacrifice animals, a task which is done by his assistant, the *danya*. And it seems that, like the *gisia*, the *jonthai* is entitled to perform purification (*tharba*).

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