The Use of Analogy in the Interpretation of Prehistoric Cultures: A Study among the Garos of Garo Hills, Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT: The present paper is an attempt to show how analogy can be used in reconstructing past culture by taking two related variables. The studied area include a prehistoric site in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, and the present population of a village in East Garo Hills, wherein no prehistoric tool has been found. The Neolithic celts found in Tebronggre and the iron hoes presently used in Resu-Adinggre, are highly comparable. Some aspects of past culture related to economy, for instance, food foraging, food preservation, sexual division of labour etc. can therefore be spelled out.

INTRODUCTION

Analogy can be defined as "the transportation of information from one object to another on the basis of some relation of comparability between them" (Wylie, '80). As opposed to formal analogy, relational analogies seek to determine some natural or cultural link between the different aspects in the analogy. The various things associated within it, are said to be interdependent and not accidentally linked. Relational analogies and the notion of the context of the things being compared can now be seen to be essential aspects in the proper use of analogy in archaeology. We can avoid the charges of unreliability by increasing the number and range of points of comparison between past and present, and also by identifying the relevance of the comparisons.

When an archaeologist digs an object out of the ground and says "this is an axe," how does he know? He may have dated the site from which the object comes to millennia before the first written records, so how does he knows it is an axe? The answer is, really that he doesn't. All he can do is make a reasonable guess based on the fact that the object he has in hand from the past looks like axes he has seen in his own or in other contemporary societies. To support the axe interpretation, the archaeologist might examine the edge of the artefact with a microscope to show that it is possible to cut down a tree with such an object; and he could conduct pollen studies of the environment of the prehistoric site where the object was found to show that trees have been cut down in the vicinity. Yet all these subsidiary studies are developed to support or weaken the initial analogy. However, it is pertinent to note that if things and societies in the present and past are similar in some aspects, this does not necessarily mean they are similar in others.

However much we might reinforce our analogies by increasing the number and range of similarities between past and present objects and situations, comparisons made at the formal end of the scale will always be in criticism. Hodder ('82:24-25) suggests some aspects of strengthening formal analogies. He mentions the direct historical approach, emphasising

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the range of instances in which various characteristics of the analogy are associated and less ambitious conclusions in relation to the number of similarities between source and subject.

DISCUSSION

This paper is an attempt to study two variables in isolate and to reconstruct the present-past through certain analogies. The two areas taken include Tebronggre, a prehistoric site from Rongram Block, West Garo Hills, and Resu-Adinggre, a village located in the Resubelpara semi-urban block in East Garo Hills, Meghalaya. A preliminary fieldwork was conducted in Tebronggre in December 2003, wherein a total of 83 tools were found on surfacial level, out of which only 22 have been incorporated in the study. Ethnographic data was collected from Resu-Adingrre in January-February, 2004. Even though these two places are situated in different parts of the State, they are both inhabited by the Garos.

From a materialistic point of view, Garo culture is based on perishable materials like bamboo, wood, cane, creepers and barks of trees. Of the 21 households studied, in Resu-Adinggre, 18 are bamboo structures. The implements used in gathering, fishing (baskets and traps) and hunting especially, the wooden or bamboo handles, are evidence of utilization of nature. However the relationship between environment and culture can hardly be generalized. Earlier the influence of environment was overemphasised, and it was believed that the totality of culture in an area is solely determined by that environment. But later it was found that the validity of such hypothesis was not tenable, neither environment determines culture to the extent that given the environment, we can predict culture. In fact the determinism is made in a different way, where culture succeeded in the struggle for existence because of their ability to adapt themselves to limitations enforced by the physical environment.

It was found that the economy in Resu-Adingrre is mainly based on *jhum* cultivation. The felling of trees and clearing of bushes is done during the dry months (December to January), and the materials are left to dry for a few weeks. When the debris is sufficiently dry, it is fired. From clearing to setting fire to the trees, males do the bulk work, sometimes collecting wild fruits, eggs, etc. while doing the task. The next stage of the operation consists of sowing, weeding, which the women look after (March to April). Next comes harvesting, which are the joint responsibility of the males and females. The main tool for weeding and sowing is the iron hoe. Although the spade has also been recently introduced. Together with jhum, the people also practise plough cultivation in the nearby plots and also maintain a vegetable garden within their compounds. All the twenty-one families engage in activities relating to jhum fields, which is the *Jongla abri* at a distance of 60 to 90 minutes of brisk walking, in the east. Seven families have a vegetable garden in the front yard and backyard, in which vegetables like *jalik* (chilli), *baring* (brinjal), *baring bilati* (tomato), *kobi* (cabbage) etc. are grown. Two families have such a vegetable garden on the bank of the Damring stream. As regards plough cultivation, the 8 families involved in it own paddy fields ranging from 4 –11 bighas, at a distance of 40-80 feet. And the rice variety sown in 2003 was *Aijong, Minil*, and *Jahami*. However, they too pursue jhum cultivation. In all, in the jhum field, they plant *meraku* (maize), *tabulchu* (tapioca), *te'e* (melon), *ta'a* (arum), *tamatchi* (yam), *gominda* (pumpkin), *akaru* (white gourd), *jalik* (chilli), *baring* (brinjal), *nakap* and *karek* (varieties of beans), *e'ching* (ginger), *holdi* (turmeric), *dorai* (okra), *misi* (millet) and *mi gitchak* (a variety of paddy). Twelve years back, one family started rearing silkworms in a corner of his jhum field. Now eleven families have joined him.

In spite of Resu-Adinggre being in a semi-urban block, the implement mostly used is the iron hoe both in the jhum field, as well as in the vegetable gardens in the front and backyard. It has an iron blade attached to a bamboo handle. There are two varieties, in one there is a hole in the head for hafting purposes, and in the other, the head end is pointed for the same reason. The blade is worn more on one side, though the other side too shows slight bevelling. It shows a resemblance with the Neolithic stone adzes, found in Tebronggre. These stone adzes (celts) with a unibevelled cutting edge, locally called *goera-gitchi* (thunder-bolts), have not been found in and around the adjoining areas of Adinggre, during the period of fieldwork. However it is pertinent to note that the local population could identify it as *goera-gitchi* and as an integral part of Garo folklore, which their ancestors had spoken of.

The iron blades of the Garo hoe are much bigger in size than the unibevelled celts from Tebronggre. The ones under study show the following:

1. A total of 56 iron hoes were found in Resu-Adinggre, of which, the hoe with a hollow like structure on head for hafting comprises 49, and the variety with pointed end to facilitate piercing of the tool head in the handle comprises only 7.
2. The former variety shows a length of 10-14cm in length, and 5-7cm in breadth.
3. The latter variety shows 16-19 cm in length, and 5-7 cm in breadth.
4. The edge wear angle, by taking the unbevelled side as the baseline and drawing a tangent along the bevelled side shows an angle of 15-17 degrees.

In comparison, the 22 unibevelled celts or adzes that were recovered from Tebronggre show the following features:

1. The unshouldered variety comprises 14, the single-shouldered variety 6 and the double-shouldered 2
2. No fully polished variety was seen. Mostly chipped and ground variety.
3. The unshouldered variety ranged from 5.0 to 12.5 cm in length, and 3.0 to 8.3 cm in breadth.
4. The shouldered variety ranged from 4.5 to 9.2 cm in length, and 3.2 to 7.7 cm in breadth.
5. Both the varieties show similar thickness, the shouldered variety shows 1.2 to 2.8 cm and the unshouldered variety .8 to 2.5 cm.
6. The edge-wear angle, by taking the unibevelled side as the baseline and by drawing a tangent along the cutting edge, showed an angle of 14 to 17 degrees.

Determination of the standard size and shape of new Neolithic hoe blades remain a problem, which a comparative study of the iron and hoe blades should help to clarify. When used a hoe is gradually reduced in length and breadth. This reduction in size continues until it is no longer suitable for its function, at which time it is generally discarded. This being the case most of the hoes that we recovered had reached the point where they were no longer of use. From this we can say that the ideal and useful size of the stone hoe blades was larger than the recovered tools. (Roy, '81: 93-219).

The following charts show a comparison in length, breadth, thickness and edge wear angle. It is very clearly seen that regarding edge wear angle, there is very less difference.

Chart 1
Length of Iron hoes and adzes

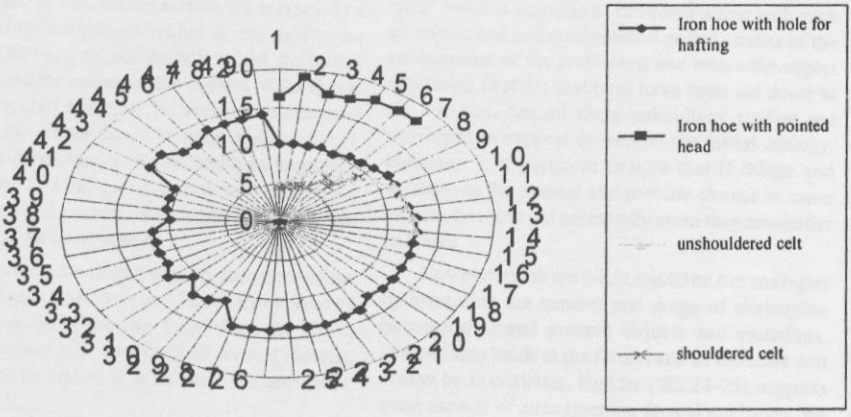


Chart 2
Breadth of Iron hoes and adzes

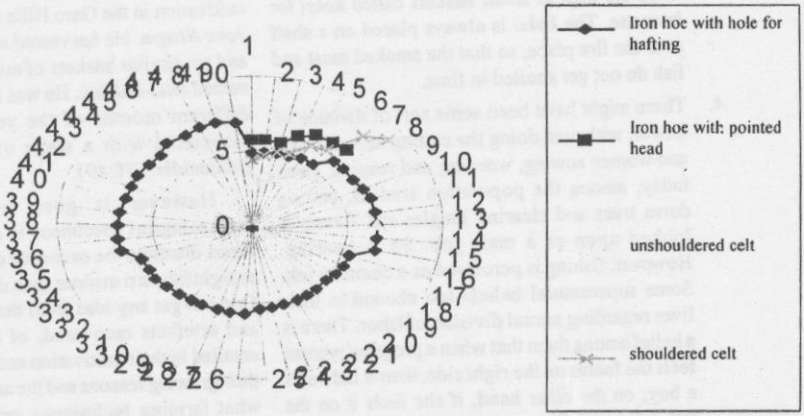


Chart 3
Thickness of Iron hoes and adzes

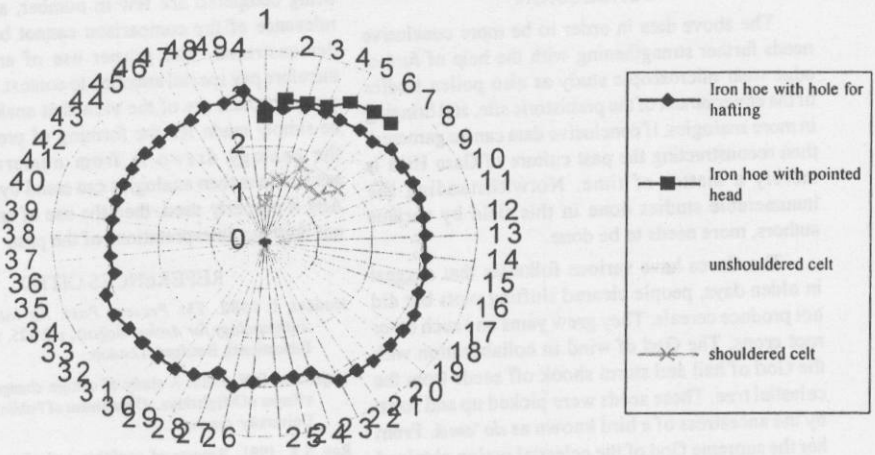
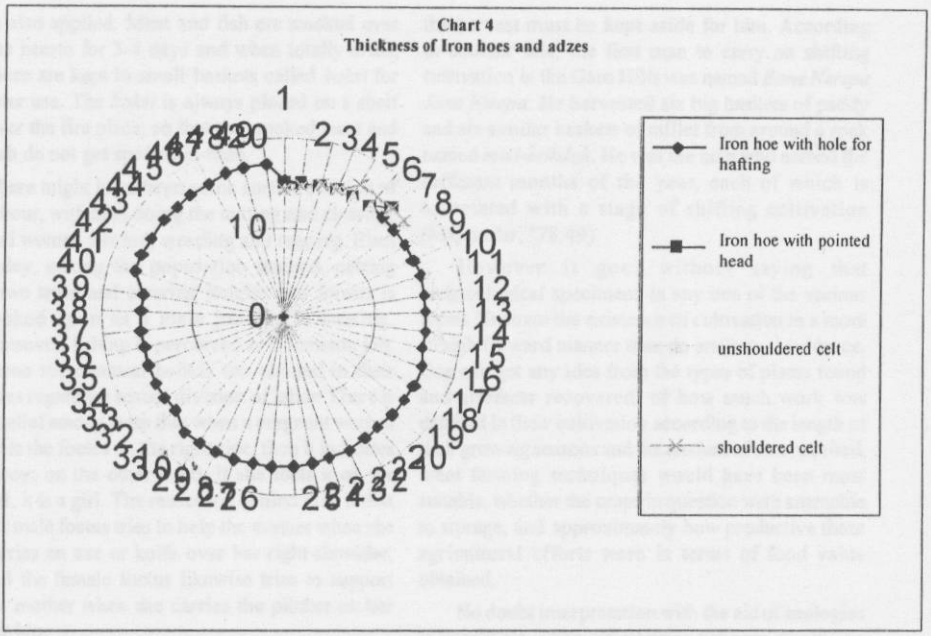


Chart 4
Thickness of Iron hoes and adzes



If we consider the Neolithic unibevelled celts as the forerunners of the iron hoe, then it is possible to recreate the past culture or at least jhum cultivation environs pretty accurately. Experimentation has shown that the said celts can be used in weeding and also in making a hole, though shallow in order to insert the seeds, if need be. Together with the celt, the cultivator used a digging stick if a deeper boring hole is required. Though such a digging stick was no longer used in Resu-Adingrre, the inhabitants put forward the fact that their ancestors did take along sticks for digging to the jhum fields.

The following might be some aspects of reconstruction of the past:

1. The authors of the Neolithic celts were no doubt foragers, who might have practiced a rudimentary form of incipient cultivation, wherein they started off as collectors from the wild, gathering tuberous plants slowly graduating to sowing and reaping. Tubers and other root crops like tapioca, arum, etc. still remain a very important part of the diet of the present population.
2. They had a subsistence economy wherein they had access to a variety of food items though less in quantity and not enough for a surplus food habit, ranging from cereals to vegetables to meat. There is also a possibility of going through a short span of surplus food followed by scarcity. It is pertinent to note that when the present population was asked, why even those who have paddy fields on the plains still pursue jhum, the answer was all too revealing. They said they wanted a variety of food crops for consumption, which is possible from crop rotation pattern in the jhum field, but also to store for later use and for sale.
3. Since their economy was of subsistence level, some sort of food preservation may have been adopted for difficult times. The Garos of Resu-Adinggre preserve cereals by drying in the sun and storing in large storing baskets the outer side of which is covered with a paste of clayey soil and water, which when hardened looks like a huge semi-ceramic container, around 4 to 5 feet. Sometimes, a paste of mud, cowdung and water

is also applied. Meat and fish are smoked over the hearth for 3-4 days and when totally dried, these are kept in small baskets called *koksi* for later use. The *koksi* is always placed on a shelf over the fire place, so that the smoked meat and fish do not get spoiled in time.

4. There might have been some sort of division of labour, with men doing the cutting and clearing, and women sowing, weeding and reaping. Even today, among the population studied, cutting down trees and clearing jungles and forests is looked upon as a male job. So is hunting. However, fishing is perceived as a common job. Some supernatural beliefs too abound in their lives regarding sexual division of labor. There is a belief among them that when a pregnant woman feels the foetus on the right side, then it indicates a boy; on the other hand, if she feels it on the left, it is a girl. The reasoning behind this, is that the male foetus tries to help the mother when she carries an axe or knife over her right shoulder; and the female foetus likewise tries to support the mother when she carries the pitcher on her left hip.

CONCLUSION

The above data in order to be more conclusive needs further strengthening with the help of further edge wear microscopic study as also pollen studies of the environment of the prehistoric site, and bringing in more analogies. If conclusive data can be garnered, then reconstructing the past culture of Garo Hills is merely a matter of time. Notwithstanding the innumerable studies done in this field by various authors, more needs to be done.

The Garos have various folktales that suggest in olden days, people cleared shifting plots but did not produce cereals. They grew yams and such other root crops. The God of wind in collaboration with the God of hail and storm shook off seeds from the celestial tree. These seeds were picked up and sown by the ancestress of a bird known as *do'amik*. From her the supreme God of the celestial region obtained the seeds of rice and planted them in his own field. Pitying the human beings living in those days without grain, he gave them the seeds. With the instruction that at the beginning of every harvest a portion of the harvest must be kept aside for him. According to another tale, the first man to carry on shifting cultivation in the Garo Hills was named *Bone Neripa Jane Nitepa*. He harvested six big baskets of paddy and six similar baskets of millet from around a rock named *misi-kokdok*. He was the man who named the different months of the year, each of which is associated with a stage of shifting cultivation (Majumdar, '78:49).

However it goes without saying that archaeological specimens in any one of the various forms illustrate the existence of cultivation in a more straightforward manner than do artifactual evidence. One can get any ides from the types of plants found and artefacts recovered, of how much work was entailed in their cultivation according to the length of their growing seasons and the amount of care required, what farming techniques would have been most suitable, whether the crops in question were amenable to storage, and approximately how productive these agricultural efforts were in terms of food value obtained.

No doubt interpretation with the aid of analogies is unreliable when similarities between the things being compared are few in number, and when the relevance of the comparison cannot be adequately demonstrated. The proper use of analogy must therefore pay special attention to context. Even though many scholars are of the view that analogies should be simply made for the forming of propositions, if the analogy drawn is from numerous related associations then analogies can stand by themselves. And if properly used, then the use of analogies will not limit our interpretations of the past.

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