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## Research Paper

## WEAVING MEMOIRS AMONG THE NAGA TRIBALS: A SOCIOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

**W**eaving is an age old practice and it is probably the oldest and one of the most universally practised crafts. Weaving is a method of fabric production in which two distinct sets of yarns or threads are interlaced at right angles to form a fabric or cloth. Clothes is usually woven on a loom, a device that holds the warp threads in place while filling threads are woven through them. A fabric band which meets this definition of cloth (warp thread with a weft thread winding between) can also be made using other methods, including tablet weaving, back strap or other techniques without looms. The way the warp and filling threads interlace with each other is called weave. The majority of woven products are created with one of these basic weaves: the plain weave, satin weave or twill. Weaving form a part of the ancient heritage of India and amplify the richness and the diversity of our culture and the traditional artistry of our weavers. In all known human history humans have developed the techniques of weaving cloth from one source or the other and have used that piece of cloth to cover its body in order to get warm. However, what is interesting in the instant paper is that each Naga tribe has its own unique identity shawls and each of the shawls carries volumes of sociological meaning to the wearer. Indeed, the shawls speak one's social identity, the social stratification and social position in the society he lives.

*This paper therefore attempts to understand how weaving of shawls among the tribal Nagas have originated, and how such shawls were attested the sociological significance. Since for a tribal Naga a shawl is beyond a rectangular piece of cloth to keep the body warm.*

**KEY WORDS:** weaving, shawl, sociological meaning, wearer.

### INTRODUCTION

Weaving is an age old practice and it is probably the oldest and one of the most universally practised crafts. Weaving is a method of fabric production in which two distinct sets of yarns or threads are interlaced at right angles to form a fabric or cloth. Clothes is usually woven on a loom, a device that holds the warp threads in place while filling threads are woven through them. A fabric band which meets this definition of cloth (warp thread with a weft thread winding between) can also be

made using other methods, including tablet weaving, back strap or other techniques without looms. The way the warp and filling threads interlace with each other is called weave. The majority of woven products are created with one of these basic weaves: the plain weave, satin weave or twill. Woven cloths can be either plain (in one colour or a simple pattern) or can be woven decorative or artistic design<sup>1</sup>.



During the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC textiles acquired a new symbol and economic status in Egyptian society. Several wall paintings in provincial tombs depict for the first time weaving and spinning, while small funerary models represent textile workshop and how the work was done: like the initial sorting of the flax fibre to make the rove, the spinning into thread, the setting up of warp from the thread thus spun, and the actual weaving of the cloth on a horizontal loom<sup>2</sup>

In parts of South East Asia the entire process, including the preparation of the thread is likened to the creation of life<sup>3</sup>. Among the Maya societies, both ancient and current, weaving reveals a deep symbolic nature that embodies numerous aspects of the culture. The most basic parts of the traditional Maya midwives, said to have powers of the moon—a goddess and also a weaver to readjust breech babies in the womb. Once the loom posts are set in place and ready for the weaving to begin, they labelled as having a head, heart and feet, associating with a human individual. Furthermore, as textiles are first born through the weaving process, they become reborn when they are turned into garment and worn<sup>4</sup>. Weaving is an integral part of tribes around the world in general and Nagas in particular as a way of life.

Weaving forms a part of the ancient heritage of India and amplifies the richness and the diversity of our culture and the traditional artistry of our weavers. In most parts of India, apart from certain specific operations such as spinning, winding and other preparatory work, weaving was never identified with women, who received less remuneration than men workers<sup>5</sup>. However, on the contrary, in Northeast India weaving is the exclusive domain of women. Hand loom weaving is an important element in the everyday life of the North-eastern people. “It is one of the largest family based traditional industry in the northeast region. The products are enormous matching with varied culture, languages and dialects. The unique creativity and skill of the weavers are found in each and every design. The identity of a particular community can also be known after observing their attires in many parts of the world<sup>6</sup>.”

### **RATIONALE OF THE PAPER**

The North eastern states of India bring together an unsung art of storytelling through a rich and sophisticated tradition of textiles and weaves. With the unique motifs, weaves, dyes and prints, textiles have been an age-old visual rhetoric for sharing tales, recording legends and perpetuating myths and folklore. However, on the flip side of the story, the influence of industrialization and globalization particularly to the

tribal people of the north east India has had a great impact thereby their age old tradition and practices of weaving has been faded away if not severely affected. Even the remotest corner of a rural village depends on the machine produce. The traditional hand loom produced shawls cannot withstand the onslaught of the machine produce in many front be it, in finishing, marketability, or even people’s choice to wear. The fact of the matter being modern machine produce is lighter, more comfortable, and economically affordable. Whereas the traditional ones are time consuming in production which is economically not viable and more importantly it is value loaded. The rich and colourful traditional shawls inscribe with many patterns and motifs that speak volumes about the wearer is unfortunately becoming less significant among the younger generation today. In the midst of this situation this paper attempts to bring out the significant sociological meaning underlying in the shawl on the one hand and to rejuvenate the old memories of such traditional culture of weaving so that younger generation may not disconnect totally to one’s own culture.

### **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

Among many Naga tribes it is believed that the origin of spinning and weaving is associated with supernatural being that has inspired them to invent the art of weaving. In this an Ao Naga legend has this to say – A lady called *Longkongla*, who had magical power and had close ties with supernatural world, invented the technique to separate the clans from each other through textiles. It may be mentioned here that tribal Ao Nagas have clans system in the social structure. Other Naga tribal communities too have their stories and legends how weaving started with them. Thus, among the Yimchunger Nagas the art of weaving and spinning is believed to have learned from the realm of spirits. The myth of *Hosa* in this connection is an accepted discourse among them. According to their myth a young man named Hosa, who was very proud of his garden of flowers and aromatic herbs. He cautiously guarded it so that nobody could pluck any plants. But one morning, to his surprise, he found out that some of his flowers in the garden have been plucked. While lost of flowers continued for three days. Hosa, therefore, decided to wait for the culprit the next night. At dawn he saw some fairy women descended from the sky and started to pluck the flowers. They were dressed in most beautiful cloths. Hosa managed to catch the fairies of them all by the corner of her shawl. Her friends tried to help her getting free but Hosa was stronger and tugged the cloth from

her. The fairy, in order for her safe release, promised to give him anything should the young man release her. Hosa, therefore, agreed to free her on a condition that the fairies taught the humans how to make these beautiful shawls<sup>7</sup>. Among the Angami's it is said that the inspiration for weaving came from the forest. This legend says, one night the spirit held a festival near the village of Viswema now located near Kohima town. When the villagers went to inspect the spot in the forest the day after, they found a large stone had been erected with length and crosswise lines inscribed into it. Nobody could read the signs of the spirits, but they inspired the women of the village to invent the craft of weaving. The stone was therefore named Khweritsü, the wrap thread stone<sup>8</sup>.

Weaving is an integral part of Naga way of life. Like most other crafts among the tribals, weaving is done along household chores by women folks in Naga society. Every Naga woman was trained to weave as they were supposed to weave for the entire family. The knowhow for weaving by women was admired and adds womanly quality which is valued in Naga society. Indeed, weavers depending on her weaving skill fit into different rank. Each pattern in the shawl carries significance and that the finished textile can be read like a story. Among the tribals, girls expressed their love and care for their beloved by presenting weaving products, the more intricate the design, the more love it symbolises<sup>9</sup>. Different cultural practices and social values governs the mind of the tribal people in Nagaland such values and practices are manifested in different forms for eg, among the Lothas, it was considered that a woman was not ready for marriage if she did not have weaving skills. A woman was ready for marriage only when she could weave a man's loin cloth. A Zeliang woman would traditionally present a shawl woven by herself to her would be groom. A Chang Naga groom also wears the shawl woven by the bride on the wedding day. In fact it was one of the criteria used in the selection of mate among the Nagas traditionally and even today in many situations. In earlier days at the time of marriage young brides were presented with weaving equipments by their parents irrespective of social status.

The age old practise of traditional weaving in loin loom is still practised today in Nagaland. Loin loom is simple to construct and easy to operate. They have neither permanent fixture nor heavy frames also they are easily portable. It is also cheap and mobile. It can be handled by a single woman. The weaver can roll it out and carry with her. She can weave outside basking in

the sun or weave it inside her house during rainy or hot season. In early days weaving also played the role of socialisation, as grandmothers, mothers and daughters sit with other family members to make the garments they discuss style, techniques and most importantly about social etiquette, the custom of marriage, child birth etc.

Although the loin loom is a simple device it can weave many intricate designs that speaks sociological meanings. The motifs and designs are not just created by the weavers but each motif has a symbolic cultural meaning attach to it, which signifies the wearer status through the motifs and design of the shawl or attires. The designs are hard earned. A person is entitled to wear particular design or motif because of his achieved status either through headhunting or after performing the feast of merit. These garments are much more than a mere adornment, for example among the Ao Naga the highest honour was accorded to a particular shawl called *Tapensasü* traditionally, the shawl is accorded so because one has out of its richness has drawn a community feast a mithun was slaughtered for sacrifice. The feast do not end here, it rather has a yearlong affairs where purity between husband and wife are also maintained. Thus, it gives a social standing to the wearer. "In traditional societies where fabric comes from and how it is significant and how it is worn and by whom" is very important<sup>10</sup>. It may be mentioned here that such feast of merit are followed with all sanctity therefore not all rich man could perform the feast. Naga shawls vary from a simple white cloth made of cotton to elaborate pattern shawls. The designs and colour may vary from tribe to tribe and clan to clan or even villages. Shawl and mekhala (wrap around sarong) are generally woven in three pieces and then stitched together with the centre strip having more designed and ornamentation then the borders, which usually have the same pattern. The ordinary white or indigo blue shawl can be worn by ordinary member of community; however, the decorated shawl can be worn only by certain members of the community and this is so because he has certain extra achievements which others could not. There is certain shawl in every Naga tribes which imply rank and status. Such important status bearing shawl has special embroidered designs varying from tribe to tribe and also from person to person depending on their success in life. Each motif has a cultural tradition and a story to tell relating to its social and cultural roots. It also shows the wearer's record participation in raids, his history of offering feasts of merit, his wealth, his

clan, his seniority within the clan and his place within the family. Every man wears a body-cloth measuring about four feet six inches deep, and the patterns of these are numerous and often striking. They proclaim a man's wealth and prowess; some indicate that wearer or his father or both have performed the mithun sacrifice. In many cases both by bringing trophies of enemy's head and feast of merit<sup>11</sup>. It is interesting to note that among the Ao Naga tribal group a little girl's first garment was simply a cotton string (pezü c; ayet m)<sup>12</sup> round her waist. At about 5 yrs old she is given her first skirt, which is white in colour in some villages while for some other villages it is dark blue. It is ornamented with red embroidery, and the pattern varies according to the wealth of the father<sup>13</sup>. Rongsu-sü<sup>14</sup> (c) is the most decorative Ao tribal cloth and the most difficult to earn, for it can only be worn by a man whose grandfather and father have both performed the mithun sacrifice. This shawl is confine to the chungli (c)<sup>15</sup> speaking phartry villages of Akhoi, Changtonya, Yaongyimsen and Merangkong. The pattern consists of alternative narrow bands of dark blue line. All over it are thick long bunches of dog's wool dyed red, and it is edged at the ends with black and red goat's hair tassels, each tassel being ornamented with cowries. *Aosü* or *Aomelepsü* (c) is identical with the *Rongsusü* except that it lacks the goat's hair fringes. It can be worn by a chungli speaking man who has performed the mithun sacrifice more than once by himself and by his sons and daughters and son's son. Among the mongsens(m)<sup>16</sup> speaking phartry who call it *Aowasü* or *Aowamelepsü*, it is worn by women. *Tapensasü*<sup>17</sup> (c) or *turanamsü* or *waru-sü*(m) is the first of a well defined series of three cloths in which the motifs is light blue bands ornamented in red on a red cloth. In this cloth the bands are broad, and it can be worn by a man whose father as well as himself have performed the ritual of mithun sacrifice. In some villages a person has the right to wear such ornamented shawl provided he himself made mithun sacrifice five times.

*Takarlaipsisü* (c) another shawl that has narrow blue bands and can be worn by any man who has done the mithun sacrifice. whatever the status of his father may have been, while man of the Imsong-pongen clan are entitled to wear it without having done any mithun sacrifices. The mongsens do not wear *Shipensü*, called in many villages as *aomelepsü* and by the mongsens as *aowamelepsü*, it resembles the last cloth, but has still narrower blue bands. It can be worn by a man irrespective of whether he has sacrificed a mithun or not, but provided

that either his father or brother has done so. *Yongmiremsü* (c and m) is a red cloth with narrow dark blue lines it can be worn by a man whether he has sacrificed mithun and whose father has done so before him. Such a shawl is still used in some villages of changkikong range under Mokochung district. Another shawl called *Yangnangsü*, has a pattern consisting of rather narrow alternative bands having narrow light bands in the centre. It is worn in certain mongsens villages of changkikong range, its significance is exactly that of the *shipenü* as described above. All these above clothes indicate the wealth of the wearer or his family<sup>18</sup>. It may be stated a rich man's daughter is privilege to wear a patterned sarong/mekhala which indeed a poor man's daughter is deprive from such privilege. In the same line a rich man's wife mekhala is more heavily ornamented than that of a poor man's wife, the extra ornamentation between wife and daughter of rich a man also appears to have different patterns in certain ways. It may be stated the legacy of richness and social standing is enjoyed by the daughter even after she establish a separate family with her husband which happens to be not very affluent.

On all occasion, *tsunkotepsü* is a warrior shawl, therefore it is worn by male members in the Ao naga community. However, woman from *Anichar* clan is entitled to wear *tsunkotepsü* the warrior shawl which is strictly meant for man in Longkhum village. Legend has this to say on the matter, a woman from the Anichar clan was attacked by a head-hunter. She fought back with brave heart and overpowered the enemy and beheaded him. This is how a woman of Anichar clan was entitled to wear the head hunter shawl<sup>19</sup>.

Chi pi khwu shawl of Chakhesang Naga tribe is also called the chief of chief's shawl or the shawl of merit. The rows of pattern are added in batches after consecutive feasts, and the embroidery on each set of patterns has to be stitched within a day before the sunset. *Mene* is a shawl used by both men and women for wrapping their private parts. *Etalashe* is a small piece of cloth or bodice used by women for wrapping their body. It is black colour with yellow broader. The traditional colours used by the Chakhesang tribe are mainly red, black, white, green and yellow. All these different colours are dyed by women themselves. *Khonomas* shawl is the most common warrior shawl of the Chakhesang tribe. This shawl has a spear motif which signifies bravery in war. The *Mozaluo* shawl too is a warrior shawl and has spear motif on it along with a

motif similar to piece of flesh. Loramhoushu is a cloth with white, red and black bands and the one with black with red and yellow hands is called Lohe. Whereas Nekhro is a small cloth worn under the mene as under wear. Tshunokeda is a mene, a black cloth woven by women and decorated with three lines of cowries-shells. A person who wears four lines of cowries shells in mene is an indicator of achievement in love making with different women in three aspects; firstly with a married woman, secondly, with two different girls but having similar name. Thirdly, with two sisters whose biological parents are same. Thus, tribal nature and quality of life is reflected in the shawl they wear. The motifs used by the Chakhesang's Nagas are spear, diamond, Nu kongra and the flesh motifs. The spear in the Chakhesang shawls signifies bravery so only a warrior can use this shawl. Diamond motif is a symbol of aesthetic beauty and of auspicious things as it is a precious stone. The V shape Nu Kongra motif signifies a weapon used for shooting arrows in the war. The flesh motif resembles piece of flesh and hence signifies the death humans in war<sup>20</sup>.

Among the Chang community an ordinary cloth called *kaksi nei* gets its effect from use of broad band's alternating with narrow lines. On a general base of black, there are a series of narrow bands nearly a centimetre in breadth at about 8 cms interval. This cloth is worn by unmarried boys and girls. *Silang nei* a blue colour shawl with no ornamentation is worn by newly married couple. One of the most beautiful shawls of Chang Naga is called the Tobu nei. This cloth consists of only two stripes. The upper strips are found the following bands in order from the top. Two black bands nearly 2 cms each separated by a narrow red line, a broad red band of 8cm wide, a narrow blue line, two narrow black bands separated by a narrow red band, a broad band, two black bands separated by the narrow band and a broad blue band nearly 12 cms wide striped by a few white lines. In this, blue band a very prominent zigzag pattern in alternate red and black is woven. This zigzag design is signifies the winding body of a serpent. The zig zag lines are woven uniformly, leaving a measured marginal space at both ends. If the zigzag falls short of the measured margin, it is a belief among the Chang, that the cloth should not be worn by a young man for he will have a premature death. But the restriction is not there for an old man. Shangbu nei is a Chang warrior shawl. It was believed that while weaving this shawl, the weaver should not eat or drink from other

house or she would succumb to death after 6 days<sup>21</sup>. *Soo nei* another shawl is exactly similar to *shangbu nei* but without the black band. This cloth is worn only by the *Ongpang* clan who belong to the priestly class. It is the duty of the elders of this clan to wash the hands of the head hunters and place the heads brought by the warriors in order of size in the Morung before any public ceremony is performed. Both male and female of Ongpang clan can wear the shawl. *Longkang nei*, shawl is also for Ongpang Clan. It has a combination of very narrow bands of blue black and black with a pattern of diamond shaped design at the border. This shawl is worn by rich men who have passed the age of fifty. *Moh nei* or cowries shawl can be worn only by these people who have taken more than six heads. Traditionally, it was practised that before weaving this shawl a genna was observed for three days on such occasion religious ritual of cock sacrifice was made to mark the genna occasion. After completion of the weaving, circles of cowries are stitched in it and inside the circles human figure representing the fallen enemy is stitched with cowries<sup>22</sup>.

Among the Konyak Naga tribe a remarkable shawl worn by the village elders in important meetings and conferences is called *nye-myon*. It is a red cloth with narrow black lines. Nikola is a white shawl where in the middle part, there are two narrow black lines at a distance of nearly 4 cms between which a lozenge pattern in red is woven. Usually Naga shawls and mekhela are woven separately into two or three parts and later on it is stitched together. The top and the bottom part are simple while the middle part has all the symbolic designs.

The culture of head hunting is directly related to the status and position of a person among the Naga tribes. Indeed, head taking has been practiced by numerous people throughout the world from ancient times all the way to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The term describes the practice of cutting off and preserving the head or skull of a fallen enemy. In many head hunting societies taking a head is considered as a rite of manhood, denoting the transition from childhood to adulthood, and young man may not marry until they have taken one. The warriors claim the head as trophies and display them prominently to increase their personal reputation and that of their tribes as a whole, with the added bonus of helping to intimate current and future enemies. Head hunting has a long history as a supremely effective weapon and those that practice it often have fierce reputation<sup>23</sup>.

Tsungkotepe or mangkotepe (c) tsungkotepe (m). This is the commonest of the entire ornamented Ao shawl and is dark blue with five broad red bands close together at the top and bottom, six narrow red bands in the middle of the cloth and a white median band with a pattern in black which includes circles representing heads. There are mithun heads and human heads indicating that the wearer has even performed the ritual of mithun sacrifices.

## CONCLUSION

Clothing is one among several emblems which gives a person social identity. But it does not convey the same meaning to all the members of the society. What is communicated will depend on the identity of the wearer. Our clothes say not only who we are in our society but how we are in relation to the prevailing religious and moral value system. We can say that each Naga textiles embodies specific cultural meaning symbolising identity, status and achievement; more than just a piece of textile, it carries our cultural information. These symbols are specific to the community, but also a part of the general intimacy of cloth. Textiles have become modes of communication and have always carried down from one generation to another, the meaning shared by the community members especially in a tribal society like Nagas who do not have a script or written history of its own. Indeed weaving in loom is slow and tedious but the love for products has an emotional attachment that tribal communities still cling to such tradition. Traditional shawls speak volumes of the wearer and their tribal identity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/weaving>. accessed on 1.10.2016.

<sup>2</sup> Garcia.2015. *Textiles in Ritual and Cultic Practices in the Ancient Near East from the Third to the First Millennium BC* Available at: [http://ctr.hum.ku.dk/conferences/2015/Booklet\\_with\\_abstracts.pdf](http://ctr.hum.ku.dk/conferences/2015/Booklet_with_abstracts.pdf) accessed on: [6<sup>th</sup> November, 2016]

<sup>3</sup> Barnes & Eicher p-4. Jackie Hawkins 'So that's who you are! Clothing and identity.

<sup>4</sup> Pretghel and Carisen, *The development and symbolism of Maya textiles*. (1988, p-124-130). available at: <http://anthrojournal.com/issue/October-2011>. Accessed on 15/11/2016.

<sup>5</sup> Baud, Isa (1991), 'In all its Manifestation- The impact of changing technology on the gender division of labour', in Ch Victoria Devi *Handlooms for livelihood in Northeastern Region: Problems and Prospects. Journal of Rural Development*, Vol 32, No(4) pp.427-438 NIRD, Hyderabad.

<sup>6</sup> Dr N. Ranjana Devi, *Status of handloom sector in NE India; Need for institution support for development in the journal of Vivekananda Kendra institute of culture*. p-94. M.G Road. Uzanbazar, Riverside Guwahati-1

<sup>7</sup> Government of Nagaland 2009: 170-172 *Naga textiles*

<sup>8</sup> Wettstein 2008b, Kharmawphlang 2002. *Naga Textiles* p: 56

<sup>9</sup> Paoki, 1988 in the *Handlooms for livelihood in North-Eastern Region*. Ch Victoria Devi

<sup>10</sup> Jackie Hawkins P205

<sup>11</sup> JP Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, p; 35.

<sup>12</sup> The Ao community is divided into two phratries, there are certain innate difference between the two in terms of language and attires therefore (c) is indicated as chungli speaking phratry and (m) indicates of mongsen speaking phratry.

<sup>13</sup> JP Mills, p 40.

<sup>14</sup> Rongsu-sü meaning shawl dyed in colour in Ao term. Therefore Rong is colour su is dye and sü is shawl. There are different types of shawl which has significant meaning attached to it.

<sup>15</sup> Chungli (c) Ao naga tribe has a phratry system on the basis of language. Therefore chungli (c) indicate of those who speaks Chungli dialects.

<sup>16</sup> Mongsen (m) Ao naga tribe has phratry system on the basis of language. Therefore mongsen

(m) indicates of those who speaks mongsen dialect.

<sup>17</sup> Tapensasü in local term is basically 'completeness' that is to say one who have completed the series of feast completing all formalities are entitled to wear such celebrated shawl as a symbol of one's position because of richness.

<sup>18</sup> JP Mills; pp 35-36.

<sup>19</sup> Marion Wettstein P: 170 *Naga textiles* (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Anjali Karolia & Richa Prakash *Design and development of fashion accessories inspired from the hand woven shawls of Nagaland*.

<sup>21</sup> The arts and crafts of Nagaland: p-40.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Chingmak an old Chang man, age about...70 years interviewed on 3/5 20014

<sup>23</sup> Linda Heaphy. [www.khashgar.com.au/articles/headhunting](http://www.khashgar.com.au/articles/headhunting)

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  13. Linda Heaphy. [www.khashgar.com.au/articles/headhunting](http://www.khashgar.com.au/articles/headhunting).
  14. Interviewed Mr Chingmak Chang of Tuensang village aged around 70 years on 3/5/14.