

A TRIBAL IDENTITY: THE TRADITIONAL COSTUME

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Abstract:

This article outlines the unique traditional costumes of the Tangkhul tribe. A tribal community that occupies the Ukhrul district of Manipur and Somrah track of Myanmar. Their arrival in the present habitat is shrouded in mystery as there is no written record up until the arrival of Rev. William Pettigrew. They have very rich culture and traditions and one element of it is the beautiful shawls and skirts weaved in the domestic handloom. Handloom industry is one of the oldest industry of this tribe, an industry that have survived the test of times. The tribe is known for the numerous handloom products and each item having cultural meaning and significance. It is a paper that strives to present the importance of preserving these costumes to protect the tribe from extinction and being suck into the ever dynamics of social, political and economic world.

Terms: Kashan, Kachon, La Kharan, Kachon kharak, Leingapha,

Introduction:

Manipur is a small Northeastern state of India. It is small in physical landmass but rich in cultural diversity. The valley and the surrounding Himalayan hills is inhabited by numerous tribes and communities. It is mini India in terms of diversity of dialects, traditions and religion that co-exist in conflicts or in symbiosis. There are three major groups of communities in the state, namely The Meiteis-Pangals in the valley and the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo in the hills. These communities have numerous sub-groups and one among them is the Tangkhul Naga tribe. The Tangkhul kingdom occupies the Ukhrul district of Manipur extending to the Somrah track in Myanmar. All the communities of the state are classified as Mongoloid and speaking the Tibetan-Burman language.

History

The history of the Nagas are very vague and obscure as they have no written record of their origin or the wave and route of migration. (*M. Horam*) From ages past their history and stories have been transmitted down to the younger generations through oral communication in the form of songs and folklores. Unfortunately much of these songs and folklores have been neglected and forgotten due to negligence or pursued of western education, lifestyle and change in religion.

Attempts has been made in the recent past by scholars to trace of the history of the Tangkhul with all resources available; the Meitei chronicles, the folklores and songs, ornaments, clan title and history, comparison with the other similar tribes in other countries etc. Scholars have tried to trace back the route of migration with some success but such exercise have been like searching for a needle in a haystack.

The Tangkhuls are believed to have migrated to the present settlement in waves from Myanmar side. It is believed that they settled in the present ruins of Samshok for a long period of time until conquered and forced out by more powerful Shan tribe. They then move eastward in search of new land and finally settled in the unoccupied present territory. There are many theories of the origin of the nomenclature of “Tangkhul” but generally accepted that is given by the Meiteis. (*Sothing A.S.W*).

This tribe is well known for their skill in terrace farming, jhum cultivation and weaving. They are also known for the skill in making knives and this is one of the theory for the nomenclature of the name “Tangkhul” (Thang = Sword/Knives, Khul = Village). They are also known as the first tribe to have been converted to Christianity and exposed to western education through the coming and establishment of a school in Hunphun village by Rev. William Pettigrew in 1895. The arrival of western education and Christianity changed the socio-economic and political system of the tribe forever.

Some of the significant social changes witnessed has been the end of animism and conversion to Christianity, demise of the dormitory system replaced by schools, change in clothing, the oral mode of learning has been replaced by the introduction of Roman scripts of the Tangkhul dialect. On the economic front; introduction of many other professions other than agriculture, monetary market economy rather than barter system etc.. One of the greatest change witnessed is the end of intervillage conflicts and head hunting but of course the village republic mode of governance continues to thrive.

One aspect of tradition that has not been discarded but improved is the method of production and consumption of the famous beautiful traditional clothes. There are many types of traditional shawls and skirts weaved and marketed today. Some of these are handed down from ages past while some are recent introduction as a way of memorial or celebration or observation of an occasion. This is an industry that has survived the test of time as put rightly by T.C Hodson “...a general industry carried on by every housewife, ...” (*T.C. Hodson*).

Method of Production

In the years past, the traditional shawls and skirts were the only form of garments worn by the tribe. They were either barely clothed or semi-naked. The traditional clothes were weaved for self-consumption in every home (*T.C. Hodson*) and sometimes exchange in the village fair “Leingapha” during the festivals. It was a traditional norm for every young women to learn to weave which adds great value to the beauty of a woman as rightly said by Khashim Ruivah “...*prove her worth every inmate must learn the art of weaving minutely and carefully and if she could prove herself well it automatically gave her a higher status and htherby she could secure for herself a higher value in the society.*” (*Khashim Ruivah*).

The cotton required for weaving the clothes were acquired from the Meiteis in the Sena Keithel or Royal Bazaar (*T.C. Hodson*) and the required color was prepared from plants (*Iris Odyuo*). They exchange the cotton for salt and other products in the market or for money if they have. Once the cotton is acquired, it is dyed and dried. The yarn now is arranged in the “Rathing” in length and sized for weaving. The process requires simple inputs but high skill. Weaving skill is taught at a very young age at home and in the girls “Longshim”. Every girl desires to weave the best. In the Tangkhul kingdom, the western villages such as Ukhrul, Toloi, Tuinem, Ngainga, Phadang, somdal, etc are well-known for quality handloom products (*T.C. Hodson*). In fact even today, they are the hub of the traditional handloom products and commands high price. It was a major occupational skill expected of every woman

The traditional handloom weaving mechanism is made up of simple wooden tools and a leather belt. The handloom to weave the traditional costume are simple and homemade. It comprises of the following items:

1. “Ra Ranthing and Phung”: it is a block of wood with holes in it at specific spacing to place the sticks and bamboos to arrange and weave the yarn for weaving.
2. “Raluithing”: it is the piece of wood or stick on which the arranged yarn is placed for weaving. On this wood the leather belt is hooked while weaving.
3. “Kapem”: it is the shuttle to weave
4. “Aphor Kapem”: it is the small shuttle to weave the design in the helm of the shawl or loin cloth
5. “Ranathing, Rana Rashung”: a small bamboo stick
6. “Aphorthing”: A small bamboo stick to work and weave the design at the helm
7. “Raphunthing”: another bamboo stick use at the end of the handloom to attached to the wall or a wooden log.
8. “Rahokra/Rakap”: it is a rope to tie with the loin cloth of the weaver
9. “Rakapthing”: it is a piece of wood/stick to keep the cloth in place and maintain quality
10. “Raphar”: A small bamboo stick that has the yarn to be used for putting into and across the cloth while weaving and this is what the “Kapem” hammers into position.
11. “Pheiphanthing”: A small wooden stool or block to rest and secure the feet.
12. “Rahokra/Rapun”: A broad leather belt hooked to the
13. “Tharap”: made of honey bee hive to strengthen the yarn
14. “Tareng”: is a simple spinning wheel made of bamboo

It is solely a female profession and done in the evening or morning after the more important agricultural work and in specific season (*T.C. Hodson*). The production is mainly for family consumption and gift but of course today it is taken as a profession to commercialize or to earn extra additional income.

The yarn is put across and around the sticks in a certain pattern with a given color combination. Then it is removed and mounded on a wall or a frame, the woman sits on a low stool and straps the leather belt and begins the long tedious work of weaving. The design of the beautiful Lozenge-shaped motif patterns at the helm of the shawl or skirt/loin cloth requires skill and is time consuming (*A.S.W. Shimray*). Every shawl and skirt has specific combination of color and motif to identity and signify. A skillful weaver can complete the required skirt “Kashan” or shawl “Kachon” fabric in two days. The fabric is then stitched together to have the final fine traditions Kashan and Kachon. Today, there are power looms that produces and competes with the traditional handloom products but for a Tangkhul Naga, the handloom product is still the preferred and priced possession. It is owned and worn with pride. It is still one of the most priced desired possession of every Tangkhul regardless of where they are and who they are.

Types and Significance

The Tangkhul Naga costumes are well admired and respected for their red, white, black, blue, green, red and orange traditional clothes as remarked by Mrs. U.G. Bower “Nowhere have I seen such a concentration of textiles as there was at Tuinem... dyed thread, red, white, black, orange, green and gold ...”. Different types of shawls and loin clothes are weaved by the women in the intervals of agricultural activities such as morning, evening, and off season before the New year sets in.

There are some traditional shawls and loin clothes which has been handed down since time immemorial and has great social significance while many of them in the commercial market are of recent introduction to commemorate a memorial or a celebration. The products of the handloom industry of the Tangkhuls can be classified into two:

1. Traditional age old shawls and loin clothes:

The traditionally weaved and worn clothes are highly priced and treasured. It is a clear indication of who you are and which tribe you belong to and it is expected to be worn with pride and respect. These are items that is usually gifted to individuals respected and loved. These are the shawls and loin clothes that the tribe is believed to have had since time immemorial and is still considered to be of high value and respect:

A. Shawls:

1. Changkhom: Worn by Girls, unmarried boys

Red and black with design in the helm

2. Haora: worn by married and unmarried men of age

Red and white with design in the helm

3. Thangang: worn by clan chiefs and elders signifying honor and position

Simple stripes of black and red

4. Luirim: worn by old aged people, Awunga and priest

Design of black and red in a white cloth

5. Raivat:

A shawl of red and black with drawings of skull, cock, spear, knife, house etc

6. Phorrei Kachon: A shawl with large pieces of Red and Black color weaved fabric
7. Khuilang Kachon: It is a shawl of Red, Blue, White, and Green Weaved fabric.

B. Loin clothes/Skirts:

1. Thangkang: worn by the wife of Clan chiefs and elders
2. Seichang: worn by Princess and women of royal descendants (Kharaknao)
3. Phangyai: worn by Old aged women
4. Kongrah: worn by the Commoners (Vahongnao), widow
5. Zingtainsingla
6. Wungnao Phila
7. Khuilang
8. Phorei

9. Malao: a small loin cloth for the man

Kachon:

Sl. No	Name	Major colors	Color of the design
1	Changkhom	Kazik (Black), Kahung(Red), Kachar (White) & Kapolang (Orange)	Khamatek (Green), Kachar (White), Yaningang (Yellow)
2	Khuilang	Kahung (Red), Kahcar (White), Kazik (Black)	Kazik (Black), Kahung (Red)
3	Raivat	Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)	Kachar (white), Kazik (Black)
4	Thnagkang	Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)	Kachar (White), Kazik (Black)
5	Haora	Kachar (White), Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)	Khamtek (Green), Kapolang (Orange)
6	Luirim	Kachar (White), Kazik (Black), Kahung (Red)	Kazik (Black), Kachar (White)

Kashan:

Sl. No	Name	Major colors	Color of the design
1	Seichang	Kazik (Black), Kahung (Red), Kachar (White)	Khamatek (Green), Yaingang (Yellow), Kachar (White)
2	Phangyai	Kazik (Black), Kahung (Red), Kachar (White)	Khamatek (Green), Kazik (Black), Kahung (Red)
3	Thangkang	Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)	Kachar (White), Khamatek (Green)
4	Kongrah	1. Kazik (Black), Kachar (White) 2. Kahung (Red), Kachar (White)	Khamatek (Green), Kahung (Red)
5	Phorrei	Kazik (Black)	Kahung (Red), Khamatek (Green)
6	Wungnao Phila	Kazik (Black)	Kahung (Red), Khamatek (Green)
7	Luingamla	Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)	Khamatek (Green), Kachar (White), Yaingang (Yellow), Kazik (Black)
8	Rose	Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)	Khamatek (Green), Kahung

			(Red), Yaingang (Yellow)
9	Zintai mansingla	Kazik (Black), Kahung (Red)	Kazik (Black), Khamatek (Green), Kachar (White)
10	Khuilang	Kahung (Red), Kachar (White), Kazik (Black)	Kahung (Red), Kazik (Black)

(compiled)

2. Modern Tangkhul loin clothes:

It has been observed that there has been many additions to the traditional shawls and loin clothes of the Tangkhul tribe with education, technology and exposure to the world. The additions are very much considered as a traditional garment but they do not replace the significance and role of the age old traditional garments. These modern garments are worn as a designer and to commemorate a specific occasion or as a memorial of an individual with significant impact on the tribe. The recently added ones are all loin clothes and the only added trend for men is the vest coat.

1. Rose: It is a loin or a wraparound cloth designed and weaved to remember the unfortunate raped by the Indian Para military and ultimately committed suicide of a young Tangkhul maiden Ms. NS. Rose from Ngapurum in 1974
2. Wungnao Phila: it is a loin cloth beautifully design to be worn by the economically abled ones. As the name suggest, it is meant for princess and royal family.
3. Ruth: It is a wraparound cloth designed by Miss. Ruth from Phungrei village.
4. Elizabeth: a loin cloth to remember the unfortunate loss of a young school girl, kidnapped and killed for the love of money or the rot of extortion rampant in the state.
5. Centennery: Different loin clothes design by respective villages to commemorate the celebration 100 years of arrival and conversion to Christianity.
6. Luingamla: This wraparound was designed by Ms. Zamthingla in memory of her friend lost in the madness of human lust. A young girl Ms. Luingamla Muinao Ngainga village, wasraped and killed by the Indian military in the pretext of insurgency operation.

The garment and identity

All Naga tribes are similar in many ways, the story of origin, food habits, dormitory system, occupation, customs and traditions, political institutions, weapons and implements, agricultural practices, festivals, and beliefs. So then what is it that differentiate or identifies one tribe with the other. Not only among the Naga sub-tribes but also with the other Mongoloid tribes of the Northeast region.

One of the major element of the custom and tradition that differentiate one tribe from the other, the gender, social status etc. is the traditional costume (*Iris Oduo*). Every tribe has their own unique costume which is easily identifiable and associated only with a particular tribe. Of course today with the expansion of infrastructural facilities the traditional costumes are weaved and commercialized but regardless of where it is weaved, sold or who wears it, it still identified with the concern tribe. Thus, the identity of a tribal is the

traditional costume but that does not mean that you become one by wearing it. It is the costume that identifies the existence of the tribe. Without this unique costume, the individual is just another tribal without an identity (Alok Kumar Kanungo). This is the reason why they are possessed and worn for all special occasion. It is less of fashion and more of identifying with the tribe.

Then what is it that differentiate and make the Tangkhul traditional costumes to stand out and unique? What is it that makes it possible to identify you as a Tangkhul or for that matter with any other tribe when you are seen on those costume? It is the color combination and the unique design weaved into the shawls and skirts. Wearing a certain clothe also identifies you with a certain group, sex and social status. The Tangkhul Naga tribe shawls and loin clothes stands out because of its bright color and the beautiful Lozenge shaped design. There is no other tribe that has such costume to be confused with. One of the identifying design is the Lozenge shaped motif or the design at the edge or helm of the shawl or skirt known as "Aphor". It is the design at the helm of the shawl or the skirt usually in green, white, golden, orange, and black. They make the traditional costume very beautiful and admirable.

Conclusion

It needs to be emphasized here the significance of the industry, it is an essential element in the continuation of the existence of the tribe. Without this industry the tribe will disintegrate into non-existence. With the introduction of the new designed costumes identified with the tribe, the aged old costumes need to be preserved. The younger generation need to be educated on the aged old traditional shawls and skirts and their purposes and significance. The love and admiration for their traditional costumes need to be engrained and imbibed in the minds of this generation.

Thus, we can conclude that the identity of the tribe hangs on these beautiful traditional costumes. Therefore every effort must be made to preserve and ensure the survival of this important weaving industry for it is the identity of the tribe. As long as it survives and thrives, the tribe will because the shawls and loin clothes identifies the tribe and not otherwise. The tribe identity that you carry and exhibit is your beautiful shawls and skirts designed and handed down by our ancestors. When the traditional costume and language is lost, extinction of the exotic Tangkhul tribe is inevitable.

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