

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Cultural Significance of Chin-Kuki-Mizo Dresses in Manipur

Carolyn Niengneihmoi

Research Scholar, Manipur University, Manipur, India

Abstract:

The tribal arts and crafts of Manipur provide for the fascinating study of tribal culture. This is readily apparent in the crafts of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes. It is an integral part and reflects every aspect of their culture. They have an independent existence which conditions their outlook towards Arts and Crafts by way of building their homes, household items, costumes, jewellery etc. These crafted objects are made of simple materials and though they are not designed in the most exotic and attractive manner, they are known for their ethnic authenticity. The production of crafts is an inherent practice common among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes. They are not professionally trained or rely on hereditary talent and skill honed over generations. The leading forms of Chin-Kuki-Mizo arts and crafts include handloom and handicrafts like weaving, use of textiles, wood carving, basket weaving and jewellery made of beads, metals, ivory, wood etc. Dresses are the identity of every nation or tribe. For the Chin Kuki Mizo, “dresses are the unwritten constitution”. It is a symbol whereby a man’s social status, culture can be determined. Every shawl and loin cloth is patterned with beautiful designs and chequered with different colours which have immense cultural significance. Their clothes are created from designs based on things they find in their surroundings, such as creatures, animals birds, rivers etc as well as in the myths of origin of the tribe concerned. There are shawls and loin clothes for every group of people; for the rich, married people, youth, aged, for the poor and even for children. There are also dresses for funerals. This article focuses on providing the significance and symbolism of material culture of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribe in relation to clothes.

Keywords: Chin-Kuki-Mizo, ethnic, hereditary, cultural, symbolism

1. Introduction

‘Clothing’ is one of the basic needs of mankind has led to the weaving of textiles since time immemorial in various nooks and corners of our country. The woven textiles in various designs thus came to replace the cloth of barks of trees and skins of animals which was the dress of nomadic men for a considerable period of time in the history of mankind. Of these woven designs, some are simple and plain, while some beautiful. The plainer it is, simpler to weave and the more intricate and decorative, more difficult to weave. Dresses and crafts are primarily categorised in the material culture of a people. And while taking an in-depth study, one finds that there is a very close relationship between the concrete material items of human culture with the non-material abstract part. In the past days when modern education system was not known, cloths were primarily used for protecting the human body from the wind, sun, rain and other natural forces. Clothing is also associated with the principle idea of covering the human body especially the private parts so as to abstain themselves from immoral acts thus stabilizing the sexual and moral behaviour.

The Chin-Kuki-Mizo men usually wore a loin-cloth which is worn somewhat like a ‘Dhoti’ and a cloth or more is wrapped over the shoulder or both. The women wrap a loin cloth around the waists which reaches a little over halfway down their thighs. Sometimes, a string is separately attached to the cloth which passes round the waist to hold it up. In addition, a breast cloth is worn by the women that are tightly wrapped round the torso. The outer corner of the cloth is tucked in at a spot between the left breast and the armpit. The clothes which are used for clothing are spun and woven by women from the cotton which is grown in their land. The Chin -Kuki -Mizo men doesn’t involve much in weaving and there is no contribution from them. However the girls start helping their mothers or other female’s members of the family at a young age in different stages of weaving. It is the responsibility of the mother to instruct and guide her daughter in the art of weaving at a very tender age. All the essential clothing and requirements in a family is provided by women in the Chin-Kuki-Mizo society. Hence, the quality of a woman is judged by the quality of clothes she produces. A woman who had exceptional knowledge of weaving embroidery technique is given a high reputation especially among the womenfolk as weaving different patterns of embroidery is taken as competition in the olden days.

The study of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo artefacts and the technique involving its preparation have great significance by virtue of their relation to the whole social organisation particularly from the viewpoint of their religious values and practices. Different designs with distinctive motifs and colours are connected with meanings which have sociological significance and mystic Ideology in close connection with religious beliefs and past recollections. The clothes or attires have a deep cultural significance and they assumed different names according to the purpose for which they were used. For instance, ZAWLPUAN – It is included in a woman’s possessions when she gets married. It is intended to be kept for wrapping the body of the women’s husband when he dies and it is held

to be a disgrace if she fails to wrap her husband's body in a Zawlpuan. PUANDUM- is a cloth used by the men. It is a combination of black (6cm and 7cm), red (6.5cm), yellow (5mm), and green (5mm) thread and is one of the better kinds of cloths made by the Lushais. PAWNRIN-is a cloth made out of blue and white thread and used by the women. The PUANDUM and the PAWNRIN are used in many ways. When a man dies, his body is wrapped in a Puandum and he is buried in it and the wrapping of the body in the PUANDUM is regarded as a mark of respect to the deceased. A woman's body should similarly be wrapped in a PAWNRIN. PUANDUM has a very deep cultural significance. In earlier days every girl was invariably required to weave at least one puandum so that she might carry it in her 'Thul' (cane basket) at the time of her marriage. If due to very unusual circumstances, she failed to carry it thus, it was considered her prime duty to weave one soon after going to her in-law's place ,as failure to have at least one Puandum by her was looked upon as highly disgraceful in their cultural set up .The possession of Puandum by the newly married girl was so conceived as it was culturally linked with one of her very sacred duties namely to provide a distinctive cover for the dead body of her husband if per chance the husband met his death during her lifetime. It could also be used for covering the dead body of any near one in the Husband's family. PUANDUM also assumes different names according to the purpose for which it is mainly used. Thus when it is used to cover a dead body it is called 'THIHRIN PUAN' (thi means die). While it takes the name ZAWLPUAN it is presented as a token of affection and love or to establish cordial relationship with someone. Zawl means friend and hence the transformed name of Puandum as Zawlpuan. If the Puandum is used by the parents of a girl as a bedspread to enable a boy friend of their daughter to sleep with her in their house, it is called DAWN PUAN PHAH. This implies an indirect consent of the parents to the couple to have pre-marital sexual relationship with the condition that they would subsequently bind themselves in marriage failing which; the boy is required to pay a prescribed fine. DAWN means 'not to consider' and PHAH 'to spread'. PUANDUM as ZAWLPUAN is also sometimes used as a wrapper. It used to be a favourite night cover for young people during their night stay in Zawlbuk (men's dormitory). PUANPI or PUANPUI – A mattress for a married woman carried as a part of dowry when going to her husband's house for the first time or when legally married, in case of elopement. It is made from coarse cotton and involves lots of manual work. Generally, it is six by four feet in dimension. Because of its weight, it is seldom washed. It is made by passing round every fourth or fifth thread of the warp, a small row of raw cotton and drawing both ends up. A raw of this cotton roll is put in after every fourth or fifth thread of the wool, so that on one side the quilt is composed of closely placed tufts of cotton. THANGSUO PUON OR THANGCHHUAH-It is a handloom cloth for the persons who earned the right to wear this by killing the maximum number of enemies in a war. A man who has earned the title of 'Thangchhuah' is allowed to wear a cloth of a certain pattern and those who have killed men in war have special head dresses, known as "Chhawndawl" and "Arke-ziak". PUANLAISAN-It is a red striped cloth. In Hmar language, Puon or puan means cloth, Lai means middle and sen or san means red, but in the middle there are two black stripes also. The cloth has several designs; a) Sakat Zang Zie: This design looks like arrows and Hmars interpret this as the designs on the back of a tiger. In their language, Sakai means Tiger, Zang means back of the tiger and Zie means colour. b) Disul: Di in Hmar language means love and Sul means abandoned. It is said that this design was evolved out of a tragedy. Once a Hmar boy fall in love with a girl from the same community. Unfortunately, the boy died suddenly and as the girl was very much in love with the boy she used to visit the grave regularly and ultimately she also died in grief. The souls after death met again but could not stay together due to the law of the land. Before they finally departed the girl wove this design for the boy so that whenever his eyes saw this particular design he could remember the girl. NGOTEKHERH- The cloth has two broad black stripes of closely spaced wefts passing horizontally through the body of the cloth having a white warp, on the two end borders of this cloth with SakaiZangZie, Diseu and Kokpuizik Zie designs woven in it. (Kokpui - the branches of which are intertwined, Zik is the upper part of the plant and Zie means intertwined).The design thus symbolically represents the upper part of the koui plant. SAIPIKHUP; Saipi means elephant and Khup means knee. The design thus resembles elephant's knee. It is extensively used by the Thadous in Kampongarea. KHAMTANG-The base of the cloth is black and the sides and end borders have yellow designs. Some stripe designs known as Khamtang form the borders. It symbolises the designs marked on the upper side of the python. There are also some flower motifs known as Changmaimu. Both Khamtang and Changmaimu are complimentary to each other and have different social significance. The legendary beliefs about the Khamtang pattern was that, somewhere during 500 B.C, there was a place called Khovandar in which lived a lady named Chawngnu who fell in love with a python-god. Before she joined him in the realm of immortality, she caused her lover to lie by copying the markings of her lover's body and sang a song

"I sat weaving upon a rock,
Placid stream runs below,
I copied the markings of
My lover's skin
To which I added
With crab markings"

Changmaimu resembles the cucumber seed. There were two brothers who sowed cucumber seed on a clay mound. The younger brother's cucumber became big enough to eat which they divided among themselves. The elder one ate up quickly and demanded another portion from his brother. The younger refused to give anymore. The elder threatened to drown himself on the mound. Yet the younger refused to give anymore. The elder kept threatening and started sinking. At last he disappeared under the earth. The parents came home from work and enquired the whereabouts of the elder brother. After much persuasion, the younger brother informed that he disappeared under the clay mound. With an assurance from the younger that he would share his remaining portion, the elder brother came out . THANGNANG-It is again a simple black cloth having two designs at the end borders. One of the designs is known as Goshemjang having a similarity with the shape of a gourd musical instrument, the other is a diamond like design symbolizing the belly portion of the python. MAIJAPJEM; this design resembles a fan made of bamboo and cane. In Kuki language, MAIJAP means fan

and JEM means colour. THANGO PUON; THANGO in Paite means famous and puon mean cloth. Thus there are some restrictions imposed on the use of this cloth. Unless a paite kills his enemies either in inter-tribal feud or in general war, he is not entitled to wear; a cloth with this design. The Paites who show distinction by killing some ferocious animals like tigers, elephants, wild buffaloes etc are debarred from using the Thangou puan. The other alternative is to harvest the largest quantity of crop in the village and the paite who actually performs this is allowed to wear the Thangou puan. The Thangou puan has eight broad stripes and between these are four narrow red and white stripes. The middle portion has four one-sided symbols and three red stripes. The symbols are kiukau or zigzag pattern, Tangmimu or cucumber pattern, Shialutun or the form representing the downward direction of the head of the Mithan and Len buam Thuam (Len in their language means big, Buam means a banyan like tree and Thuam means a point where a branches meet). JAWLPUON- Jawl in paite means friend and betrothed lover. The cloth is also named Shashengsin Puon meaning a cover cloth for a basket with meat carried by a married girl going first time to her husband's house. The Jawlpuon has nine red stripes and eight black stripes alternately arranged running vertically throughout the length of the body. There are two rows of Shial Lutun designs separated from each other and the end borders have motifs resembling the eyes of birds in yellow, pink, red and green colour. TAWLHLOH PAUN- Tawlhloh in Mizo language means to stand firm; not to change position; not to move backward. Tawlhloh puan was thus indicative of "never turning back" the attitude of a warrior synonymous with do or die. It was a cloth which could not be put on except by a very courageous warrior who had established for himself a reputation for such exceptional bravery. The traditional significance of Tawlhloh puan was that the wearer was held high in esteem while the Mizos in former days found some of their compatriots venturing to put on this particular type of Puan before going out to fight. If a person putting on this cloth was found retreating from fighting he was scorned or looked down upon by the people at large. It is a cloth about two yards in length and 42 inches in breadth with a white surface. Four black stripes made of four intertwined threads gave a chain-like appearance to the stripes. Two of these chain-like stripes breadth wise were so arranged as to divide the whole cloth into three equal parts. The other two stripes used to be woven along the two vertical edges of the Puan. Along the length too there were two stripes running over the whole length in such a way as to divide the cloth into three equal parts.

2. Conclusion

The crafts of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo do not represent the finest example of Craftsmanship. However, they stand in evidence of a social fact and distinctive specimens of tradition and customs. Hence, through their craft is interpreted every way of social and cultural life. Their crafts primarily cater to very specialized tribal needs and to sociological aesthetical and personal values. Their arts and crafts reflect the value philosophy and attitude towards life. It is important to note that weavers face several drawbacks. It is also necessary to understand the difficulties against which the individual artist's struggles; Lack of materials, most primitive tools, lack of training, hesitation in showcasing one's work and a climate in the state which discourages entrepreneurship are some of the impediments faced by the craftsman and to appreciate traditional dresses requires empathy with the craftspeople.

3. References

- i. Bertram S Carey CIE; Assistant Commissioner, Burma and political Officer, Chin Hills. H N Museum. Imphal.2000..
- ii. Chatterji, N. Mrs. Dr: "Puan, The pride of Mizoram", Firma KLM Private Limited on behalf of Tribal Research Institute Aizawl, Mizoram
- iii. Gangte, T.S: "The Kukis of Manipur", Delhi, 2003.
- iv. Gangte, Ngaknu: "Ethno-Historical Study of the Gangte", Unpublished Ph.D Thesis submitted to Manipur University, 2002.
- v. Guite, Vanlalruat: "Traditional Dresses and Crafts of the Zomis in Manipur", Unpublished Ph.D Thesis submitted to Manipur University, Imphal.1999
- vi. Khayi, Sinalei: "Arts and Crafts of the Tangkhuls: A Study in their Cultural Significance". Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, submitted to Manipur University, Imphal 1997.
- vii. Kumar, Satinder: "Encyclopedia of South Asian Tribes". Vol VI.
- viii. Parry, NE: "A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies", Tribal Research Institute. Aizawl. Mizoram1927.
- ix. Roy, Nilima : "Art of Manipur" . Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi 1979.
- x. Shakespeare, John: "The Lushei Kuki Clans", N. Delhi; 1912.