



Weaving the Past and Present: Ao Naga Traditional Attire in Transition

Resenmenla Longchar

Department of History, ICFAI University Nagaland, India
resenmenlalongchar@iunagaland.edu.in

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Abstract

In Nagaland, weaving is a traditional art that has been passed down through the generations. Nagas are known for their love of colour, which is why they are known as colourful Nagas. Nagas are also great collectors of ornaments. Naga traditional attire frequently has symbolic purposes. Messages regarding a person's age, marital status, occupation, or even their participation in rites and ceremonies can be conveyed through the use of particular colours, patterns, or motifs. Clothing is, in a sense, the product of one's attitude and identity. It is not confined to clothing or body covering. Like other Naga tribes, the Ao Nagas have numerous kinds of costumes for men and women, each of which is distinctive and peculiar to each clan. Traditional Ao Naga women's clothing and apparel are diverse and explicit, with a variety of meanings. Ao Naga women have had their clan identification through their clothing since ancient times. It is assumed that with the arrival of the British, Christianity, and education in the Naga Hills, traditional dress has been replaced by more contemporary fashions that incorporate parts of Western and Asian attire for everyday use. Acculturation has made people more modern in their attire than in any other aspect of their lives, hence dress is the most rapidly changing culture in each community. Thus, this paper attempts to determine whether the influence of other new cultures has resulted in the hybridization of indigenous attire, and whether the customs, dresses, and ornaments have any relevance to the current generation in a society where a plurality of cultures has resulted from the influx of mass media. The paper further seeks to highlight the importance of recognizing and appreciating Naga traditional cultural attire in the midst of social change and transition.

Keywords: Attire, traditional, transition, identity, Ao Naga.

Introduction

In Nagaland, weaving¹ is a cherished traditional art that has been handed down through generations. The Nagas are renowned for their vibrant use of color, earning them the nickname "colorful Nagas." They are also avid collectors of ornaments. Traditional Naga attire often carries symbolic meanings, conveying information about a person's age, marital status, occupation, or involvement in rituals and ceremonies through specific colors, patterns, or motifs². Clothing reflects one's identity and attitude, extending beyond mere body covering. For instance, one of the most distinctive garments among the Ao Naga is the decorative warrior shawl known as *Tsungkotepsü*³ which serves as a status symbol. This shawl is particularly favored by Ao men, but not all males are permitted to wear it.

Historically, only the wealthy and warriors were allowed to don this shawl. It features motifs such as mithuns to signify wealth, elephants and tigers to represent bravery, and a human head to symbolize achievements in head-hunting, along with other symbols like a spear, dao, and cock.

In traditional communities, clothing can function almost like a language, revealing details about an individual's age, gender, marital status, nationality, religion, social class, or profession.

Like other Naga tribes, the Ao Nagas have various types of costumes for men and women, each unique to specific clans. The traditional attire of Ao Naga women is diverse and rich in meaning, with their clothing serving as a marker of clan identity since ancient times. In the past, a woman's dress was influenced by the wealth of her grandfather, father, and husband. For example, a woman might wear one hornbill feather on her head for each mithun her husband has sacrificed. Accessories such as hair bands, hornbill feathers, earrings, necklaces, and tattoos were used to signify a woman's status.

With the arrival of the British, Christianity, and education in the Naga Hills, traditional dress has increasingly been replaced by modern fashions that incorporate elements of Western and Asian attire for everyday wear. This acculturation has led to a more contemporary approach to clothing, making dress the most rapidly evolving aspect of culture in each community.

Thus, this paper attempts to determine whether the influence of other new cultures has resulted in the hybridization of indigenous attire, and whether the customs, dresses, and ornaments have any relevance to the current generation in a society where a plurality of cultures has resulted from the influx of mass media. The paper further seeks to highlight the importance of recognizing and appreciating Naga traditional cultural attire in the midst of social change and transition.

Clothing and purpose

Clothes that reflect or symbolize an earlier culture, tradition, customs, history, or religion of a specific area, people, or religion is known as old fashioned clothing. Clothes have played a significant role throughout human history for a variety of reasons. Clothes have always been a key component of cultural identity and tradition expression. Distinctive traditional attire from various societies and cultures aids in recognizing them and their customs. These clothes often convey pride and a sense of community. Clothing has served as a social status and hierarchy indicator throughout history. The kind of clothes one could acquire in many societies was frequently a reflection of their wealth and social standing. The clothing that members of various social groups were permitted to wear was governed by sumptuary rules in numerous cultures. Since clothing has changed over time, various fashion trends are frequently linked to particular historical eras. A person's clothing from a specific age might provide important details about that era's culture, technology, and social mores. Additionally, clothing has practical purposes. For varied activities and environments, numerous types of clothing are designed. Gender roles in society have been upheld or challenged through the usage of clothing. The traditional dress for men and women has contributed to how men and women are perceived. A growing trend towards gender-neutral clothing has emerged in recent years. Clothing has served as a medium for cultural exchange as societies have grown increasingly connected through trade and travel. Cultures frequently converge as a result of the influence of styles from one location on fashion trends in other areas. The clothing industry has changed as a result of new material developments and manufacturing methods. The way we dress and interact with our clothing has been completely transformed by innovations like synthetic textiles, waterproof coatings, and wearable technologies. In rituals and ceremonies, clothing is frequently employed. A valuable source of historical documentation is clothing. Clothes that have been kept in good condition can shed light on historical textiles, craftsmanship, and fashion. Historical clothing is frequently on exhibit in museums to educate visitors about bygone eras. Thus, clothing has played a significant and varied role throughout human history, influencing matters of culture, identity, status, religion, and more. Its significance is important to the development of human civilization and goes much beyond its just utilitarian function of providing warmth and safety.

In Naga society, the ancient culture is vividly reflected in their colorful clothing. Attire encompasses a wide range of accessories, including earrings, tattoos, hair buns, feathers, necklaces, armbands, bracelets, and more. Consequently, the history of clothing includes a diverse array of tangible artifacts. Unlike tattoos and societal functions, certain items like feathers can be assessed more objectively; for instance, hornbill feathers have remained largely unchanged over the years. Historical accounts from Europeans were once considered the only sources

that could be reliably dated, leading to the belief that the history of the Nagas and other pre-literate communities began solely with the advent of the British period. This perspective has shaped contemporary academic practices, often overlooking the historicity of the Nagas, which has been preserved through oral traditions. Clothing serves as one of the most effective means of expressing cultural identity, with choices made based on the context of the occasion. Different cultural community also “create” and store information in them like creating designs and patterns; and even display and preserve their innovative. Similarly, today, perhaps more than ever before, both men and women consciously choose their dress to construct and substantiate the image they intend to show to the world; the modern term is “role playing”⁴. Nirad C. Chaudhuri said, “I believe implicitly that a man who has lost interest in clothing and adornments has lost interest in life”⁵.

Ao Naga traditional attire

To gain a deeper understanding of the diverse attire among the Ao Naga women, we will discuss some of their clothing, ornaments and accessories. The attire of Ao Naga women varies based on the designs unique to their villages and clans. They wove their clothing using a loom and natural dyes. A distinctive feature of their clothing is the wraparound garment, referred to as “*Supti*” in the Chungli dialect and “*Anu*” in the Mongsen dialect, which is primarily in shades of red and black. Different patterns are worn to reflect a woman’s status, allowing men to identify her village of origin⁶. The shawls worn by these women are generally of a similar style.

The Aos possess beautifully crafted ornaments primarily made from brass, cornelian beads, cowrie shells, and conch shells. During festivals, women adorn themselves with all their ornaments. In everyday life, it is customary for a woman to wear at least one necklace, although the daughter of a wealthy man may wear several. There are four types of necklaces known as *Aziik* in Chungli and *Alik* in Mongsen. Ao women can be characterized by the ornaments they wear, especially during festive occasions when they are heavily adorned. The distinction between rich and poor can often be seen in the variety and quantity of ornaments worn. It is believed that a woman without any ornaments is considered unlucky, as all ornaments is traditionally removed from the deceased.

The tradition of wearing traditional attire remains significant for Ao Naga women today. Many women don their traditional clothing for special occasions, festivals⁹, and cultural events, thereby preserving their cultural identity and heritage. However, the influence of modern fashion and evolving times has led to a gradual shift towards more contemporary clothing styles among the younger generation¹⁰. Despite this trend, traditional attire continues to be highly valued and is often embraced as a symbol of cultural pride and identity. This continuity can be observed across various platforms.

Table-1: Different types of wraparound and shawls⁷.




















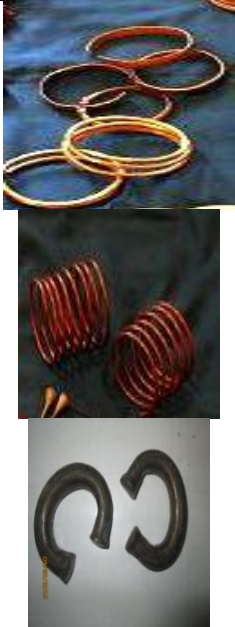

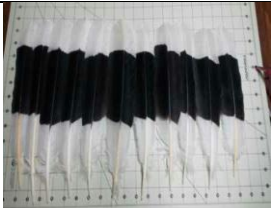
Wraparounds and shawls	Description
	<p>This wraparound, characterized by its rectangular shape and vibrant red color, is traditionally worn by the Walling clan of Khar village. It features a design with blue or black stripes set against a black background.</p>
	<p>The <i>Matsujang</i>, also known as <i>Zungijang</i>, is the most widely used wraparound among the Ao Nagas. Its name is derived from its design, which resembles cucumber seeds. This wraparound is crafted on a red background, featuring black lines that separate large blue or black stripes. The distinctive <i>Matsujang</i> pattern is intricately woven within these blue or black stripes.</p>
	<p>This wraparound features a white background adorned with three blue horizontal stripes on each end, two in the middle, and three vertical lines in red and yellow. It is traditionally worn by the Jamir clan from Khar village.</p>
	<p>This wraparound, traditionally worn by the women of Merangkong village, combines a red and black background. It features red horizontal lines intersecting with black vertical lines, creating a striking design.</p>
	<p>This wraparound is referred to as <i>Wayakumlar sü</i> by the people of Waromung village, while the Ungma village calls it <i>Pongentsur sü</i>. However, its common name is <i>Tenuk sü</i>. It is woven on a red background with large blue stripes and four small black lines. Within the blue stripes, there are two pointed conical shapes facing the same direction and one black conical shape facing the opposite direction. According to <i>Wayakumlar</i>, the black conical shape represents the tail of the hornbill.</p>
	<p>This wraparound is known as <i>Nokma</i> and is referred to as <i>Chupi sü</i> by the people of Waromung, meaning "Butterfly," as its design resembles butterfly wings. It is woven on a red background, featuring small black lines and blue stripes that incorporate the intricate design.</p>
	<p>This wraparound is known as <i>Waru sü</i>. According to old stories from the Waromung people, the name "<i>Waru</i>," meaning crow, was inspired by the abundance of crows in the area when they first settled there. The wraparound is crafted on a red background with black stripes and black lines, while red designs are intricately woven into the black stripes.</p>
	<p>One of the rarest wraparounds among the Ao community is the Changki wraparound, named after the Ao village of Changki. Unlike other wraparounds, it is blue in color. It features four black lines, within which red rectangular shapes are intricately woven as part of its design.</p>
	<p>This wraparound, known as <i>Ngami sü</i>, features black and blue stripes woven on a red background. According to old stories, it was traditionally worn by elderly women.</p>
	<p>A white shawl with a blue stripe, though not very common, is also called <i>Itsung sü</i>. It is occasionally worn by Ao women in certain villages.</p>
	<p>This shawl, commonly referred to as <i>Itsung sü</i> in Mongsen or <i>Keyisü</i> in Chungli, is widely worn across almost every village. Traditionally, in earlier times, it was wrapped tightly around the body under the armpits. The shawl is blue in color and features black stripes.</p>

Table-2: Ornaments and accessories⁷.

Ornaments and accessories	Description.
	<p>The Ao traditional necklace, known as <i>Mechongchangshi</i>, is a distinctive accessory typically worn during festivals. It is crafted using red and blue beads, where the red beads are referred to as <i>Jala</i>, and the blue ones are called <i>Thangro</i>. These beads are interspersed with a trumpet-shaped element known as <i>Metsuntsu</i>.</p>
	<p>The red beads and the bell are called a <i>Metsungchangse</i>. It is worn only during festivals especially by the rich.</p>
	<p>This necklace is crafted using <i>Jala</i> (beads) and a rectangular-shaped lead piece known as <i>Chuba</i> cup. It is exclusively worn by the rich.</p>
	<p>This necklace is made of orange beads, it is called as <i>Wangkhum</i>.</p>
	<p>During festivals, rich wives and daughters wear this brass chain across their body called <i>Changtong</i>.</p>
	<p>Thick twisted brass wire, known as <i>Yongmen</i>, was threaded through holes at the tops of the ears and secured in place with a string that passed over the top of the head.</p>
	<p>The Chungli groups of Ao women traditionally wear a hair bun. To create this hairstyle, they use a hairband made from collected fallen hair, which is referred to as <i>Kopok</i>.</p>
	<p>This earring was also made of brass. Earrings is known as <i>Nar</i> or <i>Naro</i> in the Ao language.</p>

	<p>The Aos were also familiar with bracelets called <i>Kisen</i>⁸(Mongsen) or <i>Kichen</i> (Chongli). They were heavy brass bracelets worn during festivals.</p>
	<p>In the Mongsen dialect, the white strings used to tie the hair are called <i>Lemlangvi</i>. It is believed that the Mongsen people were the first to use yarn, and thus the women traditionally tie their hair with strings made from white thread.</p>
	<p>A woman may adorn her hair with a Hornbill feather, known as <i>Wozumhi</i> in Chungli or <i>Wayamhi</i> in Mongsen, for each Mithun her husband or father has sacrificed. This feather is worn during festive occasions.</p>

Showcasing Traditional Attire in Unique and Creative Ways

Many Nagas display traditional attire through various methods, such as handmade dolls featuring Naga motifs, intricately designed fridge magnets for kitchen décor, and dedicated social media pages focused on traditional clothing. Additionally, Naga cultural troupes and numerous local personalities, influencers, and celebrities showcase their traditional attire during various performances. Here are a few examples discussed below:

Ikali Studio: Each doll is a masterpiece meticulously carved from fine wood, with a deep commitment to capturing every intricate detail.

Facebook pages: There are Facebook pages like Naga Traditional attire and Naga traditional dress and fashion where

they talk about traditional dress and fashion of the tribal people. It also showcases many works of the indigenous fashion designers.

Cultural troupes: There are many Naga cultural troupes who wear traditional attire and perform traditional dances and sings in different platform. Hornbill festival¹¹ which is held in the first week of December in Nagaland is a perfect time where different cultural troupes perform dances and songs. For encouraging inter-tribal cultural interaction and bringing together the festivals of the various tribes under one umbrella, the government of Nagaland has evolved a festival called the Hornbill festival, where one can see a mélange of Naga cultural displays at one place. This majestic hornbill bird is linked closely with the social and cultural life of the people, as is evident in tribal folklores, dances and songs.

Tetseo sisters: The Nagas are also fortunate to have Tetseo sisters. They are a quartet of sisters from Nagaland, who are devoted to the art and tradition of the vocal folk music of the state and have been performing on stage since they were children. They don't just keep the music of Nagaland alive but they even kept traditional Naga attire alive as they tour the world performing.

Mekhalamama: Dr. Theyiesinuo Kreditsü advocates for the revival of indigenous Naga textiles and women's narratives through her popular instagram avatar @mekhalamama. She has transformed the perception of Naga textiles over the past six years by highlighting the cultural and personal stories connected to mekhalas and other clothes through her distinctive storytelling style. She is largely recognized for having encouraged women in Nagaland, the Northeast, and elsewhere to dress stylishly in mekhalas that can be worn for both formal and informal work settings. Her advocacy has sparked additional projects that support textile wear, research, design, and sales, reviving interest in a long-forgotten custom. She is well-known for supporting locally made indigenous textiles and crafts, as well as local companies, particularly those owned by women, and for her advocacy of sustainable fashion practices.

The Combat Academy (TCA) Nagaland: The TCA is the first MMA Academy in the Northeast India and one of the few in India to have a full cage structure. The MMA fighters of the TCA before and after every battle wear their Naga traditional shawls to showcase the identity of the Nagas. According to Coach Khriemeli Metha, who is the man behind the TCA, "In any small way if we can create curiosity where someone comes up to us and asks us what those shawls represent. We can talk a little bit about our culture and if that leads to them goggling Nagaland we win a small battle there telling the larger world about us"¹².

The idea of dress which was earlier neglected has emerged as an important discourse since it is closely tied with ethnic identity and along with kinship, commensality and common cult are the "surface pointers" which make recognition at a distance possible. As a result, it is evident that the Nagas' adoption of Western culture did not completely replace their earlier customs, especially the tradition of clothing. Instead, by employing the idea of surface markers, such as dresses, any Naga can now be identified from a distance during special occasions like festivals or cultural events. This indicates that Christianity and Western culture were not completely adopted, but rather left many lingering customs in place, such as attire and cuisine etc. According to contemporary academics, clothing serves as a nonverbal communication tool and a mark of identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos¹³ posits that, "I see 'tradition' as a dynamic and adaptable process, and 'traditional

attire' not as a static representation of the past, but as a dress style capable of adjusting to the demands of the present". This perspective acknowledges that traditions are not stagnant; they evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. It recognizes that cultural practices, including clothing styles, have always been subject to modification and reinterpretation throughout history to align with present needs. This flexibility enables traditions to remain relevant and vibrant, rather than becoming obsolete or disconnected from modern society. By highlighting this adaptability, opportunities for creativity, cultural exchange, and individual expression arise. It encourages the integration of traditional elements with modern influences, allowing the Nagas to weave tradition into their daily lives without being bound by rigid expectations. This approach to traditional attire fosters a sense of belonging and identity for individuals and communities while promoting personalization and diversity. However, a potential drawback of this view is the risk of diluting or eroding cultural authenticity. Therefore, careful consideration and consultation with the community represented by the attire are essential to ensure that any changes made are respectful and informed. Naga traditional attire often embodies deep-rooted meanings, reflecting the community's history, values, and rituals. Viewing it solely as a dress style that adapts to contemporary demands may overlook these vital aspects, reducing it to a mere aesthetic choice devoid of its cultural and historical significance. Striking a balance between adaptability and authenticity is crucial for maintaining the integrity of traditions while ensuring they remain relevant and meaningful in today's society.

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