

Handcrafted Shawls of Nagaland

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Abstract- One of India's smallest states is also among its biggest conundrums. With a history as chequered and intriguing as its topography, Nagaland is yet to be explored. The state, with its diverse tribal culture, is a land of festivals and very rich textile tradition. In the textile history of India, the warrior shawls of Nagaland have a unique place and just like the way its counterpart the Scottish kilt has been preserved, there is immediate need and urgency to take care of the Nagaland shawls. We have sixteen major tribes in Nagaland and the warrior shawls of these entities vary a lot.

I. INTRODUCTION

Naga Shawl

One of the common features of the Naga shawl is that three pieces are woven separately and stitched together. In fact, the central stripe is more decorated than the other two, which generally have more or less the same pattern. The designs vary from a formal arrangement of lines to elaborate patterns of diamonds and lozenge shapes. Simple straight lines, stripes, squares and bands, varying in width colour and arrangement are the most traditional design and motifs. Each tribe has its own patterns with simple, clean lines, stripes, squares and bands being the most traditional design motifs.

Naga Shawls and its Symbolism –

The decorative warrior shawl “Tsungkotepsu”, is one of the most characteristic cloths of the Aos. On a general dark base, the cloth has a median white band and on either side of it are horizontal bands of contrasting black, red and white. There are five or more broad red bands close together at the top and bottom, six narrow red bands close to the broad white median band. The median band is painted with a pattern in black which includes figures of mithuns, symbolizing wealth of the owner, elephant and tiger to symbolize valour of the man, human head representing the success in head hunting and a few other things like spear, dao and cock. This is an exclusive male shawl, which could be worn only by one who has taken heads in war or offered mithuns sacrifice. Men of Mulir and Mongsentsunger clans are forbidden to wear this cloth.



Fig. 1 An Ao ‘Tsungkotepsu’ Shawl

The “Chuchusubangsu” shawl can be worn by men of Mulir clan as of right. The cloth itself is red with very narrow dark blue bands and a broad white median band embroidered with large red lozenge. The blue bands indicate that the wearer has not only taken heads in war, but performed feast of merit.

Another shawl worn on festive occasions by men of wealth or the sons and daughters of wealthy men is “Aomelep su”, in which dog’s hair dyed red is woven in stripes of red, yellow and black alternating.

“Rongsu” shawl is one of the most decorative Ao cloths and the most difficult to earn the right of wearing it, for it can be worn only by a man whose grandfather and father or himself have done the mithuns sacrifice. The pattern consists of alternate narrow band of dark blue and red with an occasional light blue line. All over it are thick long bunches of red hair and it is edged at the end with black and red goat’s hair tassels, each tassel being ornamented with cowries. Other shawls consist of “Tiongkong su” having each side of the centre a red band with black streaks but the central narrow breadth is woven of dogs hair dyed red and uncolored thread; “Tabensa su” having red and black stripes, but black predominant; “Lungkhumb subang” with red edge on two sides, a white stripe in the centre, but main part black; “Bangmerem su” having red and white bands at the two sides and central part white; “Keyi su” with red and white stripes alternating.

Some of the important and popular Ao skirts include: “Azujangnup su” mostly of red and black stripes with a little yellow in the black stripes. The poor may have only one design woven into each of the two breadths. The wife and daughters of a rich man may wear skirts having three or four designs woven into each of the two breadths. “Ngami su” or fish tail skirt is one in which certain dark colored threads are broken off at a certain place and short pieces of red thread are substituted, to give a fish tail look. “Yongzujangau” or cucumber seed skirt is woven in red on a

black background. The shawl is called so, as the designs on it resemble the seeds of cucumber.

Chakhesang shawls are very similar to the Angami tribe shawls, as Chakhesangs are actually the Eastern Angamis. "Khonoma Shawl", the most common warrior shawl of the Chakhesang tribe. The shawl has spear motif which signifies bravery in the war and hence is used in men's shawl only.

The "Mozaluo shawl" too is a warrior shawl and has spear motif woven on it. Also there is woven 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 bands is called "Lohe". Chakhesangs has more number of bands in this shawl, when compared to the Angamis. Green stripes may now a day be often seen in these clothes, though no green dye is known to them, and fancy cloths are beginning to supplant the traditional patterns.

"Loramhoushu" is generally of one meter and 85cm long and one meter and 8cm wide with four black marginal bands close together on both the edges, each band about 2.5cm wide. On each of the black bands, there are narrow red lines.

The size of "Lohe" is also same as Loramhoushu and the breadth of the marginal red band is 2.5cms. Close to these red bands, there are narrow green bands and two narrow red or pink bands alternating one another at an interval of 2.5cms. This is also worn as skirt by women.

There is another white cloth with black and red border which may only be worn by men who have a high social standing owing to the number of gennas of a semi-public nature performed by them.

Lotha shawls are also of several patterns and indicate the number of social gennas performed by the wearer. The ordinary shawl of the Lotha is known as "Sutam", a white cloth with broad dark blue horizontal stripes worn by boys and men who have performed no social gennas. The "Phangrup shawl", a dark blue cloth, edged with broad bands of red with a broad stripe running across the middle of the cloth parallel with the red stripes. This shawl can be worn by a man who has performed the first social genna. The pattern of shawl used by the northern Lothas is slightly different from the one used in the south.



Fig. 2 A Shawl of Lotha tribe

A northern Lotha, who has performed both the first social genna and the head taking ceremony wears a cloth namely "Chamthe", which is exactly like the "Phangrup", except that the median band is pale blue instead of white. There is no

particular cloth awarded for the performance of the second social genna, but the southern Lothas wear a cloth called "Ethasu" after performing the third social genna and is a dark blue cloth with four red bands at each of the two edges.

A man who has completed the series of social genna by dragging a stone wears a handsome cloth called "Lungpensu", which is a dark blue with five bands of light blue about one inch broad, and three pairs of narrow lines of light blue at two edges. A man who has dragged a stone more than once has four or even five narrow lines in his cloth which is called "Eshamsu".

The skirt of an unmarried girl is a plain dark blue one. On marriage, she wears a pretty skirt called "Loroesu", dark blue with big squares of narrow white and red lines giving a sort of tartan effect.

II. CONCLUSION

Of late the Naga elders no longer insist on strict observations of the code for wearing particular shawls, as the era of head hunting and tribal fights to show their valour is no longer in vogue. There is such a great demand from tourists for the Naga Shawls, but unfortunately so far none of the designs have been certified and retained as an exclusive possession of the tribe and which is their collective intellectual property. Hence there is a need to preserve and patent the shawls of Nagaland and bring its richness to the outside world.

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