Traditional Textiles and Costumes of the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland

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ABSTRACT

Art of textile designing has been a part of life in north east India. Nagaland is the place which has rich cultural traditions, folklore, myths and legends as well as customs which can trace of their ancient chronicle. The Ao Naga tribes are one of major tribe of Nagaland. The designs of their textiles are represented animal bones, creatures, animals, fishes, birds, etc. The attires Ao tribe have designed with the combination of woven textiles and decorative objects. In earlier time, the clothes worn by the men and women Naga tribes keep varying from one group to another. The tribes can be distinguished on the basis of the distinctive design and colour combination of their attire. However, their traditional attires have been declined due to modernisation and globalisation. Hence, there is need to understand the tribal textiles and costumes before they completely lost. Therefore the present paper is an attempt to describe about the traditional textiles and costumes of the major Naga tribe of Nagaland that is the Ao Naga tribe.

Key Words: Naga, Ao, Textiles, Attire, Tribe, Traditional

INTRODUCTION

Textiles have been produced in India since antiquity. The level of technology, productivity and quality vastly vary from one region to another with their traditional tribal loom in the north eastern region of India to the wider width fly shuttle loom in the south. Art of textile designing has been a part of life in north east India. It is associated with the culture and charmed people by its artistic unique beauty of the products. It forms an integral part of the material life of people (Anonymous, 2015). Nagaland is the place which has rich cultural traditions, folklore, myths and legends as well as customs which can trace their ancient chronicle. It is one of the North East states of India sharing the international border with the adjacent nation Myanmar on its maximum part of South East Asia (Sen, 1987).

According to the census report 2011, there are 14 Naga tribes and four non-Naga tribes inhabiting in Nagaland. The Naga tribes include Ao, Konyak, Sema (Sumi), Chakhesang (Eastern Angami), Angami, Lotha, Sangtam, Phom, Chang, Kheimungan (Kalyo-Kengyu) Yimchunger (Tikhir), Zeilang, Rengma and Pochury. The four non-Naga tribes include Kuki, Kachari, Garo, Mikir. (http://ignca.nic.in/craft056.htm). Amongst these, Ao Naga tribe has second highest population next to Konyak Naga in the state.
The Ao Naga mostly inhabit in the central Mokokchung district and Mon district of Nagaland. Fig. 1 shows the location the above two districts. They also inhabit other states such as Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ao_Naga). They were the first among the Naga tribes to embrace Christianity. Christianity first entered into the Ao territory when an American Baptist missionary, Edwin W Clark, reached an Ao village called Molungkimong in 1872 (https://eclecticnortheast.in).

Fig. 1: Location of Makokchung and Mon Districts in Nagaland
(Source: www.google.in)

The traditional attires of each tribe of the region strengthen communal solidarity and beliefs. The tribal costume has its own charm with their traditional textiles showcasing their highest glory of beauty. Each of the traditional textiles was woven indigenously (http://www.craftartisans.com/textiles.of.manipur.html).

Most of the tribal textiles have colourful weft woven designs. Various designs were tessellated in geometrical forms. Most of the designs are inspired from their nature and surroundings. Their designs represented animal bones, creatures, animals, fishes, birds, etc. Tribal textiles bear not only the woven designs but are also additionally decorated with natural objects like conch-shell, bird feathers, cowries and animal bone etc. In addition, the loin loom products are usually very short in width. Therefore, their cloth is made by combining some sutured pieces. There was no specific weaving site for the loin loom and the weavers could weave anywhere (http://www.indianetzone.com/8/tribes). The usual process of weaving was primitive and few simple tools were used in the whole process (Anynomous, 1968). They could weave their cloths either in the veranda or inside the house or any open site.

It was believed that in addition to Ao Nagas, tribes like Lothas, Rengmas were the cotton growers in the area. Handspun yarn made from the cotton grown in many parts of Nagaland was woven on loin loom. Before cotton became freely available and began to be cultivated by the hill peoples, cloths were made from the natural fibres obtained from a variety of plants (Saul, 2005). In earlier times, the whole process of dyeing was carried out by women.

Every Naga woman was supposed to weave the cloths for her family. Weaving was not only a social activity of the women. It also added value and meaning in the cloths. Each of the motifs and design used had symbolic significance. The cloths and attires of the Nagas were played a crucial role in identifying the gender, social status and specific regional locations of the wearer (Odyuo, 2013). Motifs and designs used by a particular tribe from one area could not be used by
other tribes. However, today, western dress and Indian dress is a part of everyday clothing of the tribal peoples. Sometimes traditional clothes are also worn in addition. Furthermore, colours and designs used for cloths are continually changing. Hence, the paper is an attempt to document and preserve the traditional textiles and costumes of Ao Naga, one of the major Naga tribes of Nagaland.

**Traditional textiles and costumes of Ao Naga:**

The design and colour of each Naga tribes differs with other Naga tribes. The costumes would also very depending on the wearer’s position in the society (www.indianmirror.com/tribes/nagaland.html). The tribes can be distinguished on the basis of the distinctive design and colour combination of their attire (http://www.nagalandonline.in/About/Profile/Culture/Weaves-And-Textiles-of-Nagaland.html).

One of the common features of the Naga cloth 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 (Prakash, 2013). They mostly used cotton for their textiles and costumes and wove fabrics in plain weave. The process of weaving was carried out by using loin loom (back strap loom).

The Aos are the most picturesque in their attire. They extensively used war paint with cowrie shells, ivory or brass armlets, huge white seashells to decorate their costumes. They used tails feathers of birds and fringes of gaily dyed hair to decorate their cane head-dresses and hunting implements (Shakespear, 1914). The traditional attires of Ao Naga tribe have been described briefly as follows:

**Male upper garment:**

The main upper garment usually was in the form of different types of shawls which were draped over the torso. The shawls were draped over both the shoulder from the back and one of the ends of the shawl was thrown over the left shoulder towards the back (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2 : An Ao Man Wearing Shawl](Source:www.google.co.in)

The different types of shawl were as follows:
(i) **Mangkotepsu Shawl**: It is one of the popular shawls of Ao. This shawl is a status symbol and can be used only by the rich men and warriors. It is also called *Tsungkotepsu*. It is made by joining three pieces/stripes of woven fabric. The two pieces on the side are in black in red stripes and the center piece is white in colour. The design is painted on the white stripe in the center using red and black coloured dye obtained from *Tangko tree*. The design comprised of human head, ancient currency, lion, tiger, elephant and cock etc. (Fig. 3, 4). Each of the two pieces on the side have five wide red stripes on black background and six narrow black stripes on red background. The five red stripes denote the woman and the six black stripes denote the man (Mongro, 1999).

(ii) **Rongsu Shawl**: It is one of the most decorative Aotextile. It can be worn only by a man whose grandfather or father or he himself has accomplished the mithun sacrifice and required feast of merit. It is considered to be a great achievement because very few were able to complete the prescribed number of feasts of merit. The pattern consists of alternate narrow band of dark blue and red with light blue line. Bunches of dog’s hair, dyed red in colour were fixed all over the shawl during the process of weaving and ornamented with cowries (gnca.nic.in/craft256.htm).

(iii) **Shotsu Shawl**: This shawl is particularly worn by rich men.

(iv) **Metsu Shawl**: This type of shawl is worn by village elders. However, no detailed description of the above two shawls could be obtained.

**Male lower garment**:

*Cowrie Apron (loin cloth)*: It is main lower garment of Ao man. This is a kind of loin cloth. It is also referred to as apron. It is designed by studding several cowries on piece of cloth. Among the Ao, it is worn to cover only the front side of the body and reaches above the knee. (Fig. 5, 6). This decorated form of loin cloth is commonly worn during the festivals. Plain loin cloth without cowries is used for everyday wear.

**Female upper garment**:

Naga women wore a bodice which was just a piece of shawl used to cover the upper part of
their body covering the breasts. Some tribal women did not wear anything even to cover their breasts. Breasts were exposed openly without any feeling of shame because it was their way of life (Mongro, 1999).

(i) **Tukutsukresu**: It is the bodice used by the Ao girl. It is regarded as a holy dress. The girls used this bodice for the first time just after attending puberty, when they feel uneasy due to sudden onset of menstruation. They reported to their mother that they cannot attend their daily work due to health problems and wore this bodice. This piece of cloth was made of either plain white or black or blue colour (Fig. 7, 8) (Mongro, 1999).

(ii) **Angtongsu Shawl**: It is the most popular shawl of Ao women. It is made by stitching two pieces of woven fabric.

(iii) **Awosu Shawl**: This shawl is worn exclusively on special occasions and festivals.

**Female lower garment:**
The Ao lower garment for women consists of a loin cloth nearly one and a quarter metre long
and about two thirds of a metre wide. It is wrapped round the waist with the top outer corner tucked just in front on the left hip (gnca.nic.in/craft256.htm). The different types of loin cloth used by women are as follows:

(i) **Ngami su**: It is lower garment having black stripes woven on red background. It was worn by old Ao Naga ladies. It is also called as fish tail skirt. It is one in which certain dark coloured threads are broken off at a certain place and short pieces of red thread are substituted, so that when the weaving is finished, the figure bears some resemblance to a fish tail in otherwise black cloth (Anonymous, 1968).

(ii) **Changkisu**: This lower cloth is used as a sarong. It is a fabric with red squares woven on a blue or brown background. This design is used by Changki clan of Ao Nagas.

(iii) **Suka su**: It is also known as **Imjasu**. It is worn by women of **Jamir** clan of Ao Naga as lower garment (www.indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php).

(iv) **Azu Jangnup skirt**: It is also a sarong mostly made by joining two panels. It is woven in red and black stripes with a little yellow line in the black stripes. The poor women have only one design woven into each of the two panels. However, the wife and daughters of a rich man may wear the skirts having three or four designs woven into each of the two panels (Anonymous, 1968).

(v) **Yongzujangau skirt**: It is also known as a cucumber seed skirt as the design on the cloth look like seeds of cucumber. It is woven in red cotton on a black back-ground (Anonymous, 1968).

**Coiffure**:

The coiffure of an Ao woman and man are elaborate. The Ao women used to decorate their hair by coiling it into a large ornate ‘bun’ at the back of the head. False plaits twisted with coils of white cotton thread are attached to the bun with brass hair pins. Feathers may also be attached to the bun. The whole arrangement is supported on either side by enormous heavy brass earrings which are passed through the helix of the ear and kept in place by a string over the top of the head (Fig. 9) (Shakespear, 1914). However, the men generally keep their hair short and decorated by head wears made from cane tied with cotton threads and feathers (Fig. 10).

**Fig. 9**: An Ao Woman in her Decorating Hair Style  
(Source: Ganguli, 1993)

**Fig. 10**: Ao Men Wearing Traditional Head Wears  
(Source: www.google.co.in)

**Accessories**:

In every society, accessories play an important role. Similarly, in Naga’s society, accessories
have a lot of significance and denote social status and rank within the society (Mongro, 1999). The traditional accessories of Naga tribe are worn by both men and women specially during festivals. Nagas are very fond of sea-shells and bone in their accessories. The different types of accessories used by Ao Naga are as follows:

**Unisex Accessories:**
- **The conch shell necklace**: It is one of the important accessory used by the Ao tribe. The Aos only the rich and the male member of the family and their offspring can wear the necklace. It is made by joining sea-shells of different sizes. The necklace is also worn by women irrespective of status, high and low, rich or poor from times immemorial. This necklace is usually worn diagonally across the shoulders and chest by the tribes people as shown in (Fig. 11).
- **Brass Bell Necklace**: The Ao considered the brass bell as one of the most important ornaments both for men and women. Only the meritorious people were entitled to wear it especially the rich. Other Naga tribes such as the Phom, the Semas and Konyak Naga wear it during the festival dances (Fig. 12).

**Male accessories:**
- **Coronet**: It is a kind of head wear which is used on special occasions. It is made by a slit cane, joined in circular form. The circular cane is then covered up with cotton thread in such a way that the circumference of the round cane exactly fit the user’s head. It is decorated by using hornbill feathers. These special feathers can be used by warriors. They are considered as a symbol of honour, richness and high social status in Ao Naga society (Fig. 13).
- **The boar tusk necklace**: The boar tusk necklace is used as decorative ornament mainly by Ao tribe. It is one of the male ornaments of Ao which is worn tightly around the neck. It is made by combination of bone of a Boar (an un castrated of wild pig), thread to bind, wood, cane, conch shell and round beads (Fig. 14).
- **The cornelian necklace**: The cornelian shell necklace is a special kind of necklace with its abundance of colour and artistic harmony. It is one of the most beautiful necklaces worn by the Ao Naga. It is also worn by other tribes such as Angamis, Rengmas, Lothas, Semas. There is no restriction on its used by the women folk. However, it is generally inherited only by the eldest male.
member of the family and if there is none, the nearest male relative may inherit the same (Fig.15).

- **Drongo Tail**: Drongo is a kind of bird and its tail is highly prized by the Nagas. It is used as an ear ornament (Fig.16).

- **Dao holder**: Dao is a kind of sword which used for hunting. Dao holder or Dao case is used to keep the dao intact while travelling. It is mostly used by all men folk of Naga tribes. It is worn around the waist (Fig.17).

- **Casket**: It is a small conical basket used to carry bamboo spikes (arrows) by head hunting warriors in olden days. It is referred to by different names by different tribes. It is usually hung at the back (Fig. 18).

- **Sash** – It is a long strip of cloth like belt worn across the shoulder and chest. It is made by stitching dyed red hair of goat on the woven small panel of cloth. The cloth was woven in red colour and was woven by the wife of warrior who had observed taboo (abstaining of sex) for at least six days prior to the commencement the task. An unmarried woman was not allowed to weave the sash (Fig.19).
Gaunlet - Ao Naga men used to wore a gunlet on their wrist as a glove. It was used as a weapon as well as ornaments since time immemorial (Fig. 20).

Fig. 17 : Dao Holder

Fig. 18 : Casket

Fig. 19 : An Ao Naga man Wearing Red Sash

Fig. 20 : Gaunlet (Male wrist glove)

Fig. 21 : Leggings (Male leg wear)
Leggings- They are worn between the ankles and knees to cover the calf region of the leg. It is generally worn in pairs like shoes. They are generally tied at the back with the help of criss-cross lacing to tightly fit the wearer’s calf. The leggings are a part of ceremonial dress and they are normally worn on special occasions. Other Naga tribes such as Konyaks and Rengmas are also fond of it (Fig. 21)

Female accessories:
The Ao Naga women are very fond of accessories for decorating their head and body. They decorate themselves with necklaces, earrings, armlets, bangles and head wear etc. The different types of accessories used by Ao Naga women are as follows:

- **Brass Ring**- It is used as a hair band which is most popular among the Naga women to decorate their hair. The round rings of brass are bound by white raw cotton threads to construct. Sometimes it also bound by brass chain instead of cotton threads which is shown in (Fig. 22). According to Ao beliefs, the use of this was invented by Mongsen womenfolk (a community of Ao Naga).

- **Crystal Earing**- It is a type of earring made from crystal. There are two types of earing used by Naga women folk. One is round which is mostly used by Tangkhul Naga of Manipur and Burma (Fig. 23) and other is square in shape which is mostly used by Ao Nagas of Nagaland (Fig. 24).
- **Beaded Necklace** - It is made of a kind of bead which is obtained from the seeds of plants. There are varieties of beaded necklaces which are used by Ao Naga women. The necklaces are generally made with brass bell and beads (www.google.co.in). There are generally two types of the necklaces. The necklace made with one round of beads and brass bell is mostly worn by ordinary Ao women which is shown in (Fig. 25). The bead necklace made with five or six round of beads and one round of brass bell can only worn by wife of chief of Ao Naga and wife of rich man (Fig. 26).

![Beads Necklace](https://www.google.co.in)

**Fig. 25 : Beads Necklace**

![Beads Necklace of Wife of Chief Ao Naga](https://www.google.com)

**Fig. 26 : Beads Necklace of Wife of Chief Ao Naga**

**Conclusion :**

The Ao tribe in Nagaland give a lot of weightage to their culture, traditions, and costumes. A number of traditions and beliefs are associated with the weaving and wearing of the traditional dress of the tribe. Their costumes are bright and colourful woven in plain weave using cotton threads.

The most important part of the Ao Naga dress is the shawl and skirt which is in simple white, black, blue and reddish yellow colour. Generally, the Naga shawls are woven in three or four pieces and then stitched together. Sometimes they used cowries and feathers to decorate their cloths. The Ao Naga have unique style of attire and they are distinguished from other Naga tribe of Nagaland. The tribes are very fond of decorating themselves by using animal bones, cowries, bird’s feathers and sea-shells.

However, there is very less published material regarding the traditional textiles and costumes of Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland. This paper briefly documents the traditional textiles and costumes of the Ao Naga tribe.

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