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Library and Indigenous Knowledge of Mizo Traditional Weaving

Abstract

Indigenous wisdom uncovered in the past has been determined to be valuable and necessary for modern society's survival. It may also be stated to be a part of some culture's or society's everyday existence. Handloom weaving is one of the Mizo people's necessities since it may be utilized to make a broad variety of various designed handloom items. This study describes how the Mizo tribe's handloom weaving is done and the significance of handloom weaving in Mizo civilization. As a source of knowledge, libraries play an important role in protecting and preserving diverse types of knowledge in various formats. It is the most trustworthy organization to take on this duty considering the falling need for indigenous knowledge because of technological values.

Keywords: *Culture. Handloom. Indigenous knowledge. Library. Mizo. Weaving.*

Introduction

In the world, there are about 650 ethnic groups spread over 190 nations (Fisher, 2013). Ethnic groups have their own culture, habits, beliefs, practices, and knowledge that they received from their ancestors. They desire to distinguish themselves from others. Their indigenous knowledge is the basic reactions of the world and surrounding environment in several respects. Lifestyles derived from indigenous knowledge, resulting in cultural identity and livelihoods. It is an empirically relevant world view that influences the character of cognition, belief, and social behavior. Indigenous wisdom of ethnic groups has transcendental worth in an infinite understanding of human being.

Indigenous Knowledge

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines indigenous as "used to refer to, or pertaining to, the people who originally resided in a location, rather than individuals who came there from somewhere else." This concept represents the original inhabitants of a location, who had their own beliefs, knowledge, and culture. Thus, indigenous knowledge (IK) is the systematic body of information obtained by local people via their experiences, informal experiments, and deep

awareness of their environment based in a specific area and set of experiences and developed by people living in those regions. It is the result of practical participation in everyday life, and it is continuously reinforced by experience, trial, and error. It is an essential source for understanding cultural interactions.

Indigenous knowledge is described as local and natural knowledge. It is a form of information that has been passed down verbally or via practice and presentation. Indigenous knowledge also refers to several behaviors that indigenous people have learned and practiced for centuries, such as cultural and traditional customs, values, beliefs, and a local people's value system. It aids in comprehending one's culture's customs in contemporary life. "Indigenous knowledges are transferred officially and informally among kin groups and communities through social interactions, oral traditions, ritual practices, and other activities," writes Bruchac (2014). IK is defined by UNESCO as "the understandings, skills, and philosophies established by communities with long histories of engagement with their natural environs" (n.d.). Local knowledge supports decision-making concerning basic aspects of daily living for rural and indigenous peoples." Indigenous people have their unique knowledge, ideas, and beliefs about many methods and activities.

"Indigenous people or native people are groups recognized under international or national legislation as having a set of unique rights based on their linguistic and historical links to a specific place, as well as their cultural and historical distinction from other communities." Indigenous peoples are also the inheritors and practitioners of distinct cultures and methods of interacting with others and the environment. They have kept unique social, cultural, economic, and political traits from the dominant societies in which they dwell." ("Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations | United Nations for Indigenous Peoples," n.d.). According to I.L.O.(2016), "Indigenous people are those who have their own cultures, languages, customs and who distinguish themselves from other parts of the societies in which they find themselves". Thus, it can be summarising that IK is the knowledge of local people for their livelihood and settlement in a particular area without external knowledge inherited from the older persons in different forms.

Indigenous People of Mizo

Mizo is a northeastern Indian ethnic group. Mizo, an indigenous people of Mizoram and adjoining states, claims to be mongoloid. They claim to have migrated from Sinlung of Chhinlung (somewhere in China) around 750 AD and eventually settled on the virgin soils of Burma, Bangladesh, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Mizoram. They were known as Kuki in Manipur, Chin in Burma, Pang in Bangladesh, and Mizo in the states of Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram. Mizoram is considered the ethnic group's homeland. Mizo means "highlanders" in Mizo, and ram means "land," therefore Mizoram literally means "country of highlanders." In many ways, Mizo people are fundamentally distinct from other people in the surrounding areas, including language, culture, cuisine, livelihood, housing, and so on.

According to the World Bank (2021), indigenous people have various characteristics such as identifying as indigenous, having a strong connection to their territories and surrounding natural resources, having a distinct social, economic, or political system, having a distinct language, culture, and belief, being marginalized and discriminated against by the state, maintaining and developing their ancestral environments and systems as distinct peoples, and so on. Mizo ethnic people have wished to preserve their identity in terms of language, culture, belief, and so on, confirming that Mizo are indigenous people in India's northeastern region.

Handloom Weaving of Mizo

Handloom weaving is the most widely practiced indigenous knowledge of the Mizo people, both traditionally and culturally, and is employed as one of the Mizo people's primary means of earning for most of them. Handloom items are beneficial in meeting most of the local people's demands. Handloom items are the most prevalent necessities among the Mizo people, particularly among women. Weaving allows weavers to enhance their financial situation.

The Mizo's most significant handloom product is the weaving of the traditional fabric known as puan, which is still utilised in all their key festival occasions and festivities today. This traditional textile (puan) is especially prized for its ethnic variety, use of colour, and theme in weaving. Weaving is an important part of Mizo culture, and women learn to weave from a young age. Weaving is generally done by women, while the equipment is made by men out of various materials such as bamboo, tree bark, and animal skin.

The precise date when the Mizo people began weaving their textile is unknown, however handloom weaving is one of the most prevalent activities of women in the Mizo tribe. Puan were formerly widespread attire for both men and women, but it is now predominantly worn by women. In Mizo society, when a woman marries, one of the typical rituals is to bring puan to the groom's house and name it Thuam Chhawm, in which the bride takes many different types of puan to her husband's house, which is then given to the husband's family and relations. Puan are manufactured in a variety of styles and designs, and each color, pattern, and design emphasize the Mizo's historic and cultural value. Different patterns and designs are found in Mizo *puan* where flower is the most used pattern.

Mizo puan, namely Pawndum, Ngotekherh, Hmaram, Tawlhlohpuan, and Puanchei, which are in great demand due to their provenance, recently received the Geographical Identification (GI) tag under the Geographical Indication of Goods Registration and Protection Act, 1999. As a result, the loin loom or backstrap loom has become one of the most popular sources of revenue, particularly among women in Mizoram. While loin looms were once utilized, frame looms, zo looms, and fly shuttles are now employed to weave puan. The loin loom weaves in two pieces, and the cloth is afterwards put together. Fabrics of a single width are produced on frame handlooms. This handloom weaving product was sold both locally and outside of the state, as well as to international nations. (“GI tag accorded to Mizoram’s handloom products,” n.d.).

Objective

The main objective of this paper is to observe and document about the different steps used in handloom weaving of the Mizo people with special reference to the weaving of Mizo *puan* those having the Geographical Identification (GI) tag.

Research Area

The present study was carried out in a village called Mualthuam North which is in Lunglei District, Mizoram. At present there are around 350 houses in this village. There are 200 households having looms in this village while the study was taken in the month of March 2021.

The data was mainly collected from a private cottage industry called 'Pachau Handloom Industry' and other households.

Methodology

Data were collected through interviews among the local weavers at their household and at their private cottage industries. The questions asked during the interview were related to the information regarding the weavers and the weaving process. Majority of interviewed weavers were age between 30-60 years of age.

Tools and Equipment of Weaving

To be self-sufficient in clothing, most Mizo families grow cotton on their paddy fields. Cotton blooms were plucked and prepared for garments using indigenous tools made locally. Yarns for weaving puan in various patterns are created using a variety of methods.

Cotton blooms were plucked and dried in the sun before being processed for weaving. Its seed must be extracted using an indigenous machine known as Herawt, a home-made gin comprised of a frame supporting two wooden rollers. The rollers' ends are cut into a screw that is grooved in the opposite direction as the others. When the handle is cranked, the cotton is dragged between them, separating cotton blooms and seeds. Second, seedless cotton is to be distributed smoothly using Lasai, a bamboo stick with a wide base and a small top, with one cane thread connected to the base and then to the top of the stick. This bow teases the cotton five times for it to be clean. Third, cotton is placed on a smooth plank and rolled with the stem of a tall grass called 'Hmunphiah' to make cotton thread that is well spread and spool systematically as Lachawn and preserved in Chawnzial, a mat made of several thin strips of wood or bamboo used to keep the raw rolled cotton to be spun. Fourth, thread is extracted from lachawn using a Hmui spinning wheel, which is a native invention. The spindle of this spinning wheel (hmu) is constructed of iron and is made of wood and cane. Wood is also used to make the wheel's support. It is used scientifically to create thread from rolled cotton. Fifth, thread was created for a huge skein of cotton using Ladinlek, a piece of wood that is sharpened at both ends like a pencil. Holes are drilled beneath each sharpened tip of the stick, and thin lengths of bamboo are placed through these holes. Locally, it is used to wind cotton yarn. Sixth, a skein of cotton was cooked with rice

to bind it and then hung in the sun to dry, a process known as Lazar. It is formed of bamboo poles that are supported by two upright pillars and is used to dry thread hanks. A long stick is placed between the hanks of thread to dry the cotton thread when combing cotton yarn with a comb in the sun. Cotton thread becomes smooth and firm in preparing for cloth because of this operation. Eight, cotton yarn was rolled off using a simple machine known as Suvel, a revolving instrument with four extended arms around which a skein of cotton yarn is wrapped to form balls around a tiny stone. It is composed of wood and bamboo and comes with its own stand. After all these stages have been performed, the cotton flower is ready to be woven on a loom. (Lianhmingthanga, 1998).

The tools and equipment used for weaving was mainly loin loom. But the improvement in modern technology has evolved and now frame looms, zo looms and fly shuttles are mainly used. The frame looms used by the weavers among the covered area were made by themselves. The frame looms cost around Rs. 15,000/-. Various parts of the loom are made up of the treadle, reeds, bamboo strips and wooden rods.

For the insertion of the weaver's foot, wooden devices were created. The additional weft method is used by the weavers to create relief designs. The weaver must reel the cotton (la duang), and for weaving one puan, they required around 12 kgs of cotton, which they finished reeling in 2 or 3 days using a machine called dynamo. And the cotton that had been reeled was hanging within a day. It takes around 2 weeks to prepare to weave one puan. The weaver takes a seat in front of the frame loom, secures herself with the backstraps, and lays one leg on the footrest. The weaving is subsequently done on the frame loom using various motions like as casting, plucking, and striking. During the weaving process, the left hand lifts the head bar while the right-hand presses down on the bamboo bar. The weft is then transferred through the shuttle from the right to the left side and vice versa before being pounded by the sword. The shuttle is subsequently passed from right to left, and the weft is pounded once again. This procedure is repeated until the weaving is finished. If the pattern is basic, the weaving of puan takes 2 to 3 days. If the design or pattern of the puan is intricate or elaborate, the weavers will take around one week to produce it. One puan is typically 60 to 65 inches long. ("Loin loom is the main source of income for the native of Mizoram," n.d.)

Position of *puan* in Mizo society (with special reference to the Puan having Geographical Identification tag)

The *puan* has significant cultural significance for the Mizos, however some have acquired popularity and importance through time. Because the designs of these *puans* have been updated by weavers from inside and outside Mizoram, the uniqueness and ownership must be protected. There are five *puans* who have played a crucial part in distinguishing Mizoram's culture and society. In August 2019, these five Mizo traditional *puans* were therefore given a geographic indicator tag. These *puans* and their cultural importance in Mizo civilization are characterized as follows:

1) **Hmaram:** This is a popular and attractive textile among the Mizos. It is normally lengthy but may be worn as a little skirt. It is only worn by females and women. In Hmaram, the white warp runs horizontally on a totally black backdrop. The motifs on the white warp are called as 'kawkpuzialzia,' 'disul,' and 'lenbuangthuam,' and these were the first designs utilized in hmaram. Warps are typically 2 to 3 inches in length and 4 in number, with little strips running through each warp. Because the material isn't particularly lengthy in width, it's usually worn well below the navel and fastened at the waist. This *puan* is no longer worn as a skirt in the current day. It is only on rare instances that it is still utilized as a little skirt, such as when performing cultural dance or appearing in a play highlighting the people's traditional culture and identity.

2) **Pawndum:** Pawndum ('dum' means 'black') was a popular fabric before the Puanchei. Bands are used to create the design. It's made up of dark colors that are weaved on a black background. This *puan* was traditionally used by young men to cover themselves at night in their Zawlbuk (men's dormitory) stay. The importance of this fabric for a woman was that a Pawndum was customarily used to cover her husband's dead body if he died during her lifetime. She was supposed to weave one and bring it with her when she married. It was also used to cover the body of any relative who died from her husband's family. Even now, it has cultural significance. Dawnpuan phah was the name given to it. Dawnpuan denoted that if there was pre-marital intercourse using Pawndum with the agreement of the girl's parents, the guy is required to marry the girl. The youngster had to pay a fee to the girl for his rejection. It is no longer worn as a clothing, but rather as a symbol of mourning for the dead.

3) **Puanchei:** Puanchei is the most ornamental puan and is regarded the most difficult to weave, taking a long time to finish. Because puanchei is a weaved mixture of many colors of yarn, collecting the colorful strands is a difficult operation in and of itself. The design is made up of red, black, blue, and green yarn that is alternatively placed on a white fabric backdrop. The colors red, black, and white dominate the design. Puanchei is weaved specifically for ladies and is greatly cherished by them, yet it is not unusual to see males wearing it on special occasions. The design of this puan is said to have been introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century, although the actual origin has yet to be identified. The Pawi clan of the Mizo tribe, who today live-in western Burma, are thought to have been the first to produce or weave Puanchei in a simpler form than what is now seen. It was then known as 'Ngotekherh Laisen,' or the red-centered ornamented fabric. Traditionally, every young lady woven at least one for herself, which she treasured and only used on special occasions. Puanchei, on the other hand, is still worn today on wedding ceremonies. Modern designs have improved on the loom and the patterns on Puanchei, and they are more complexly ornamented and exquisitely gorgeous than the ones originally woven.

4) **Ngotekherh:** Traditionally, this puan was woven on a loom using just black and white threads. The pattern was simple black and white stripes that were artfully and tastefully weaved together. Ngotekherh gained its name from the term 'hruih,' which means transverse stripes on fabric. The design appears to have been adopted in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the past, males wore it as well, but it is currently only worn by women on special occasions. This fabric rose to popularity because of its introduction to society by the community's wealthiest members.

5) **Tawlhloh puan:** Tawlhloh meaning 'to stand strong,' 'not to alter position,' and/or 'not to walk backward.' As a result, Tawlhloh puan denoted a warrior's never-say-die mindset. As a result, it could only be used by a truly brave warrior who had established his mark as one. Those who wore this puan swore a pledge never to return to the village unless they were victorious. Originally, the fabric was two meters long and around one and a half meters wide, with a white surface. The design and pattern were four black stripes comprised of four interlaced threads that

looked like a chain on the stripes. The two chain-like stripes were placed in such a way that they divided the material into three equal portions. The remaining two stripes were weaved vertically around the margins of it. Two stripes ran across the whole length of the material, separating it into three equal halves once more. However, various patterns were utilized when weaving, with each striped made up of two closely spaced tiny lines. The stripes running lengthwise were deep crimson in tone, while the ones going breadthwise were black. During the colonial period, warriors wore Tawlhloh puan and faced British soldiers to demonstrate defiance to their control and to defend the integrity of their identity and culture. It eventually acquired popularity because of its use by ladies from wealthy households at festive events such as weddings. As a result, the original meaning associated to it gradually faded as it gained new significance through the prestige value. (Hnamte, 2020).

Role of Library in protecting Indigenous Knowledge

Many Libraries recognize Indigenous Knowledge as an important source for the development of information. If libraries have not traditionally focus on preserving and protecting the indigenous knowledge, they can help indigenous communities in preserving the indigenous knowledge by providing resources and expertise in collection, organization, storage, and retrieval. According to IFLA (2008), libraries can help in:

- Collecting, preserving, and disseminating Indigenous Knowledge
- Publicizing the value, contribution, and importance of Indigenous Knowledge to both indigenous and non-indigenous people
- Involving elders and communities in the production of Indigenous Knowledge
- Encouraging the recognition of intellectual property laws to ensure the proper protection and use of Indigenous Knowledge.

One of the most essential functions of the library is to conserve information and knowledge for library users. Libraries and archives have traditionally been the custodians of knowledge and cultural legacy, housing drawings, paintings, and other documentation artefacts from the past, such as manuscripts, documents, books, audio-visual materials, and so on. They can be viewed as repositories for Indigenous knowledge and history. Libraries should play an active role in facilitating access to Indigenous knowledge. Libraries may play a significant role in recording Indigenous Knowledge in databases and webpages, ensuring its appropriate usage, and making it

simpler to sell for the benefit of communities. It can also be used to gain worldwide access to Indigenous knowledge. State and public libraries might repackage and communicate Indigenous Knowledge to literate clientele inside the library system. Non-literate persons in rural and indigenous communities can also benefit from repackaged information through public libraries and community information centers' rural information distribution initiatives.

According to Aina (2004), library and information centres are institutions responsible for the collection, processing, and storage of recorded knowledge for the purposes of reading, study, and consultation; and the librarian is the professional who is concerned with the collection, storage, processing, and dissemination of recorded knowledge in a library. According to Mabawonku (2002), information professionals have specific duties to play in understanding, identifying, collecting, interpreting, distributing, and safeguarding Indigenous Knowledge. According to Burtis (2009), the library's traditional function of collecting, maintaining, and offering access not only to materials of scientific provenance, but also to IK resources, should be expanded to make all information available.(Anyira, Onoriode, & Nwabueze, 2010).

The instruments and technology required for the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge should be available at the library. To protect Indigenous Knowledge, libraries should include ICT applications such as computers, Internet, digital cameras, camcorders, and so on. Efforts should be undertaken to gather and bundle Indigenous Knowledge and make it available on the Internet. Libraries should work with indigenous people to acquire, store, and make IK available. Efforts should also be made to urge traditional institutions and resource persons in indigenous communities to share Indigenous Knowledge with libraries for proper preservation and accessibility. (Anyira et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge is critical to the empowerment of local communities. Indigenous Knowledge, like any other knowledge, has to be used often so that the practises passed down from generation to generation are constantly available. Indigenous knowledge must be adequately conserved because the advancement of contemporary technology has reduced the

value of it and resulted in the extinction of its traditions. Libraries are critical for maintaining indigenous knowledge of one's culture or civilization. This preservation can be accomplished by recording, videography, and other means that can be made available to library users in order to improve the society's interest in indigenous knowledge. According to the findings of the study, handloom weaving aids in the socioeconomic development of weavers who rely on it as their primary source of income. The primary issue for the weavers is that the marketing within the local area is not satisfying.

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