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Dynamics of Warp and Weft: Contemporary trends in Naga textiles and the Naga collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

Vibha Joshi

This paper, based on preliminary findings, attempts to show the dynamic processes of change and incorporation of new ideas and materials in the textiles of the Nagas of northeast India by comparing the contemporary textile trends with those seen in the Naga collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) in Oxford.

The discussion derives from Emma Tarlo and Appadurai's views on museum collections and the role clothes play in a people's identity. Tarlo (*Clothing Matters*, 1996) writes that textile and clothes displays in museums often take the clothes out of their social, political and economic context. Following Appadurai (*The Social Life of Things*, 1986) she says that 'they rob clothes of much of their usual social life'. 'Clothes, which under normal course of events are exchanged, purchased, worn, stored and discarded, become ossified in the museum display case where their meanings often appears static and rigid' (Tarlo, *ibid.* 6). Thus, in the process making the notion of identity fixed and constrained.

Using data from my preliminary field research and museum inquiry, I explore whether the dynamism one finds in contemporary Naga textiles is also represented in the PRM collection. There are about 4000 objects in PRM, the largest collection of Naga objects anywhere in the world. Out of these about 800 are textiles which were collected mainly by British Political Officers, namely, J. P. Mills, J. H. Hutton, Balfour, Peals, Woodthorpe and Reid sometime between the end of 19th century and 1940s. I begin the paper by introducing the region, its textiles, and then examine some examples from the collection at Pitt Rivers museum and the contemporary trends in Nagaland.

The area and the people

Nagaland is one of the north-eastern states of India which shares its border with Myanmar (Burma). It has an area of 16,527 sq.km. The Eastern Himalayas extend into Nagaland. Most of Nagaland is hilly and covered with thick tropical rain forest abundant in various kinds of flora and fauna. The population of Nagaland is approximately 1.2 million (*Census of India*, 1991). There are sixteen officially recognised Naga ethnic groups in Nagaland and about a half a dozen more in the neighbouring states of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and across the border in Myanmar. Although known collectively as Nagas to the outsiders, each group uses a specific name, such as Sema, Ao, Angami to identify itself, and uses the term Naga as a suffix to the respective community name to distinguish themselves from the neighbouring hill communities.

Although Naga ethnic groups speak distinct Tibeto-Burman languages, they share what has been called a 'hill tribe culture'. Almost all Naga communities practice *jhum* or 'slash and burn' type of agriculture except for the Angamis and Chakhasang of Southern Nagaland who mainly practice wet rice terrace cultivation and supplement this with small plots of *jhum*.

The Nagas traditionally practised head-hunting which was a part of their initiation rites. It is said that the headhunting raids by some Naga groups on the villages in Assam close to the experimental tea gardens planted by the British prompted the British to send punitive expeditions into Naga Hills (as the area was known until the state of Nagaland was formed in 1963). In 1850s the British had also began exploring the area to find a land route from Assam to Burma. The constant raids by the Nagas on the villages under British administration forced the British to annex parts of Naga Hills. In 1867 the district of Naga Hills was formed.

As has happened in other parts of the world, the annexation of the territory paved the way for the missionaries or vice-versa. In the 1870s the American Baptist Mission entered Naga Hills. The conversion to Christianity was a gradual process and different Naga communities had different rates of conversion. A major factor which helped in conversion was opening of schools by the American Baptist missionaries, thus bringing in the modern educational process to the Nagas. The British annexation and the job opportunities the new administration brought in its wake made the Nagas aware of the importance of education. The conversion process gained momentum after the World War II when Battle of Kohima was fought between the Japanese and the Allied Forces in the heart of Naga Hills.

In 1963 Nagaland state was formed with special status¹. Access to Nagaland is restricted as it is a politically sensitive border state. There has been an armed insurgency with a demand for secession by the Nagas since 1947, the year India became Independent. The inner line regulation that was first introduced by the British keep a check on the settlers and movement of British officers has continued. An inner line permit is required by even Indians, and foreigners are not allowed to visit except when visiting affinal relations in Nagaland or the II World War Cemetery in Kohima town.

From this recapitulation of the events in Naga history it is evident that in the last few decades Nagas have experienced tremendous socio-cultural changes as a direct consequence of three major events: the British annexation in the nineteenth century, the Battle of Kohima during the II World War and conversion of 80% of Nagas to Christianity.

In the context of material culture, these changes loosened the previous restrictions. In context of weaving, as we would see later, the changes paved the way for experimentation with new designs, new colour combinations and usage of different yarns.

Textiles

It is well known that textiles have a utilitarian as well as symbolic function. The kind of cloth worn is reflective of social relations and of the expression of social identities and values. The cloth worn by a person is also suggestive of the power relationship he/ she may have with other members of the community. The Nagas are

¹ The land and forests in the state are under private ownership. Nagas are allowed to follow their customary laws to resolve most disputes. Non-Nagas are not allowed to buy land or own business in Nagaland.

traditionally cultivators and as said earlier, were known as warriors and headhunters. These two activities have been responsible for the development of vibrant textiles.

The Nagas used and still use the 'back strap or body tension' loom for weaving fabric. It is the most favoured loom, and is very convenient for the weaver because of its portability. In Nagaland weaving is in the domain of women. Spinning, dyeing and weaving are exclusively undertaken by women. The contribution of men is limited to the making of the weaving instruments, although, sometimes men may help women to warp the thread.

Traditionally, men's contribution to the completed textile was in the form of decorations of the men's kilts and body cloth with cowry shells and jobs' tear seeds and the decorative plate made of wood, cowry shells, plaited cane, and goats hair stitched at one corner of the rich man's cloth as among the Sema Nagas. Among the Ao and Rengma Nagas men also painted the motifs on the median white band of the warrior's cloth.

The fabric woven on back-strap loom is thick; the thickness being achieved by a dense warp which covers the weft. The thickness of the woven fabric depends on the thickness of the yarn used. The finest cloth is made of two-ply yarn. The width of the fabric is narrow to enable the weaving of the cloth without any technical difficulty. Both the shawls and sarongs are made of at least three separate pieces stitched along the length of the fabric. Thus the width of the finished cloth depends on the number and size of the strips of cloth that have been stitched together. The average breadth of a single piece is about 18". Men's cloth is generally made of four such strips and women's cloth could vary in width from that using a single piece to larger ones that use up to three pieces.

Although the most common pattern is of bold colour stripes of varying width, additional pattern in weft is inserted by picking the warp yarn. Most common motifs have geometric designs -- zigzags formed by alternate upright and pendent triangles, lozenges and diamonds. In some textiles the weft motifs occur as floats in the body of the cloth, while in some, for example the Angami *Lohe* cloth, the weft design is woven along only one end of the cloth.

The traditional dress of men comprises an apron or *lengta* and a knee length kilt worn around the waist. Shawl generally measure 60" x 40" almost the size of a single blanket. These are worn wrapped around the body during winters or else thrown over the shoulder². Women wear *mekhela* or sarongs and shawls. The shawls are smaller in dimension compared to the men's. The sarong vary in length from that reaching just below the knee to the those long enough to reach the ankles. Traditionally, in some Naga communities such as the Konyak, and Khiamungan the women did not cover their breasts, while in others like Ao, Sangtam the cloth was worn tightly wrapped around the body, covering the breasts. Among the Angamis the women wore (and still do so) a black tunic known as *vachie* or *todi* over which they tied the knee length sarong.

² In some communities for example, the Sangtam, Yimchungrü and Chang the men tie the shawl in such a way that ends that are diagonally opposite are taken under one arm and tied over the shoulder. The shawl is worn this way only during the festivals otherwise it is generally used as a wrap.

In the past the Naga textiles³ signified the community, gender, and social status of the wearer and there were restrictions on wearing of these shawls. For example, only those men, who had shown bravery in war, could wear the warrior's cloth; only the giver of a series of 'feasts of merit', along with his wife and their children, qualified to wear the elaborate 'rich-men's' cloth. One could not wear a cloth of any other community. The community in which designs are gender (and clan) specific, the men and women could not interchange the patterns on the shawl.

On one hand the patterns of cloth worn by men and women may differ considerably in some Naga communities, while on the other we find that neighbouring communities share similar cloth. For example, men's red body cloth with black stripes and a median white band is used by the Ao, Rengma and Lotha Nagas. An everyday cloth of blue colour with blackish-blue stripes is common to the Ao, Yimchungrü, Sangtam and Khiamungan Nagas. In the past textiles were also traded between these communities. Besides reflecting trade patterns the similarity of cloth and other ornaments also point towards similar legends of migration of these communities.

Some communities had an elaborate range of cloth, which varied according to the age and achievements of the wearer. For example, a cursory look at the catalogue cards of the Naga textiles in PRM gives an idea of a wide range of textiles that existed in a single community with very subtle differences in motifs that reflected the status of its wearer.

Changes in the style of clothing

The first conversions to Christianity were accompanied by severe religious sanction against indulgence in any activity that could be associated with traditional religious beliefs. These sanctions had a direct effect on the style of clothing of the Nagas as some of the cloths could be worn only by those who had acquired the status by showing prowess in war, head-hunting or by giving feasts of merit – all activities associated with the 'heathen' way of life which required performance of rituals related to the native religious beliefs.

As said earlier, the Christian missionaries also opened mission schools. The sanctions against traditional clothing were also applied to all the Naga students who had joined these schools. They were banned from wearing the traditional cloth and ornaments and were encouraged to wear Assam style *dhotis* or western style shorts and shirts.

J. H. Hutton and J. P. Mills, the British Political Officers (and also the writers of the first monographs on Nagas) posted in the Naga Hills in the early 20th century, were quite against this trend. Where they had direct control they exercised their power to retain

³ Ruth Barnes ('Women as headhunters', 1992) has written an interesting article on Naga textiles at the Pitt Rivers Museum, which explores the male/female and domestic/ outside dichotomy in the production and decoration of the cloth for the warriors whose achievements are outside the domestic sphere and those of the feast givers who earn the merit within the domestic sphere.

as much of the 'traditional' outfit as was possible. So the government interpreters were forbidden from wearing western style clothes⁴.

However, the effect of education on the change in the style of dressing continued. By 1920s, women had already begun to wear blouses over their sarongs and the men – shirts and shorts. The trend was more visible among the Christian converts and among the educated Christian Nagas who were employed by the British for administrative work.

Although the Christian converts preferred to wear Western clothing, an interesting development was taking place simultaneously. The converts in certain Naga groups began to wear the cloth, which could traditionally be worn only by those who had earned the right by taking a human head in the raids or given a series of feasts of merit.

In his official tour diary of June 1935, J H Hutton, who was the District Commissioner, mentions the conflict between Christian and non-Christian Sema villagers over wearing of ceremonial cloth and his suggestions to settle it amicably. To quote him:

The question of the patterns of cloths is giving trouble. Certain patterns are worn by householders who have performed certain social ceremonies and by their unmarried sons, when the boy marries he ceases to wear the cloth until he has qualified for it. The pattern is very popular and Christians have started wearing it without qualification which has scandalized the ancients. Both sides came to me about it. I ruled that Ancient had the right to it, but that provided some recognisable alteration was made in the pattern no exception would be taken to Christians wearing similar ones. I suggested a red cross in the middle of the black ground which was accepted without demur by those present.

Today although western dress is part of the everyday clothing in Nagaland, the traditionally woven cloth is in addition, commonly worn as a wrap. In the past there were restrictions on wearing these shawls. One could not wear the cloth of any other community or clan. The community in which designs are gender specific, in the men and women's cloth certain motifs could not be interchanged. Till 1950s there was restriction on weaving other communities designs. I was told that when the government weaving institute was opened in the Naga Hills, weavers from different Naga groups would take turns to weave their designs on the same piece of cloth. Now these restrictions have been done away with and one finds weavers copying motifs of other communities.

Over the years there has been a gradual revival of Naga culture which can be largely explained as their assertion of having a separate identity as 'Nagas' in relation to their neighbours in the plains as well as to other Christian communities. The demand for

⁴ Ironically, it was the British administration that ended up introducing mill made red woollen blankets, which symbolised the office of the *gaonburas* (or GB) i.e., the village elder, who was the government appointed chief of the village. Similarly, red waistcoats identified the office of the government interpreters or *dobashi* at the District Commissioner's court. The offices of GB and *dobashi* have continued till date and so has the wearing of red shawls. Walking into a village or into the district headquarters office one may come across men wearing red woollen wraps and waistcoats.

a separate nation itself brings forth the important question of one's own identity which subsequently gives rise to cultural revivalism.

Today weaving is an important cottage industry in Nagaland. Three types of looms are used for the purpose: back strap or loin loom, fly shuttle loom and power loom. Back strap loom has remained the most popular and most convenient because of its easy transportability from one location to another. It is used for weaving the fabric for shawls, sarongs, kilts, sashes, waist belts and shoulder bags. There are very few fly shuttle looms and negligent number of power looms which have been installed by some weaving co-operatives for producing furnishing cloth and low cost shawls and sarongs.

Traditionally the Nagas used homegrown cotton, and nettle fiber for weaving. Cloth made of nettle fiber was (and still is) used for bedding. Use of home-grown cotton is on decline and one finds it being used only in a few interior villages. Today the most favoured yarn by the weavers is acrylic and a blend of wool and nylon known as 'cashmilon'⁵.

Very few of the old 'traditional' textiles are seen today. Unlike in some other Southeast Asian communities the Nagas do not preserve textiles as family heirlooms. The traditional system of burial required display of the personal belongings of the dead on the grave. This makes the collection in the PRM all the more important from the point of view of studying the textile tradition of the Nagas. A cursory look at the catalogue entries and some textiles tells us the nature of the collection.

It is interesting to note that the collection at PRM seems to reflect the changes which were occurring almost 70-80yrs ago in Naga weaving, the time when most of the textiles were collected. In 1920s and 30s the Nagas had already started using yarn which was imported from the Assam plains and from Burma. The catalogue entries tell us that Burmese yarn and wool obtained from outside Nagaland was used in the manufacture of some of the textiles in PRM collection. A woollen cloth manufactured in the 1920s in the collection is mentioned as the first of its kind woven by a Naga woman.

In this context I would like to mention John Picton's (*African Textiles*, 1989) remarks on African textiles. He says that it is not correct to call the textiles 'traditional' as the phrase 'traditional textile' denotes a category of practice justified by past precedent and essentially unchanging in contrast to possibilities of innovation and development. He talks about a 'textile tradition' rather than 'traditional textiles' and 'contemporary textiles' (ibid.:11). The idea of possibilities of innovations and development within a textile tradition is what I hope to use in the study of textiles of the Nagas.

On comparing the old textile collection with the contemporary textiles, it is very interesting to find that what is considered 'traditional' now was an innovation that took place 60 to 70 years ago. I noticed a catalogue entry in PRM for a Sema Naga women's

⁵ See Joshi, 'Naga Textiles Today', 2000 for a detailed discussion.

cloth which was similar to the one I had selected for an exhibition in 1997⁶, and had been told by the weaver that it was a traditional cloth worn by a rich woman. However, the entry for similar cloth collected by J. P. Mills in 1932, reads: “woman’s cloth with pale blue bands between narrow strips of red, orange-yellow and black with double cross bands of red and yellow worked on one side of the cloth forming a check pattern. A recently invented pattern growing in popularity”.

Similarly, on comparing the Angami textiles in PRM collection with the contemporary ones, I realised that the colour combination of the stripes on the Angami *Lohe* cloth has changed from yellow and orange on a black background to that of various shades of pink and green, or red and green on a black background.

It has been suggested by textile specialists that ‘back strap’ loom permits more artistic control, therefore enabling the weaver to experiment with new motifs (Schneider, ‘The anthropology of cloth’ 1987:423). Perhaps this is reflected in the range of designs and new colour combinations that have come up in recent years.

In last few decades, besides weaving the traditional patterns with traditional colour combinations, the weavers have also experimented with different colour combinations and designs – sometimes inspired from the motifs from neighbouring states as well as motifs associated with Christianity such as those of church bells, holly, etc. Some communities have even redesigned their traditional cloth by choosing a particular colour combination and improvising upon the weft motif. For example, the Lotha Naga women’s cloth (*Kyong Sürüm*) that was developed by the Lotha women’s committee in the 1960s is an improvisation of the old cloth. The old cloth was black blue with light blue stripes with small weft motifs. The new cloth has retained the black colour, but it has multicoloured stripes and more elaborate and elongated weft motif. Interestingly, in the non-traditional range of cloth though using the same traditional motifs in the design, certain colour combinations come into vogue for a couple of years and then get replaced by other. In 1990-91 the Lotha women’s cloth using the colour combination – bottle green and red shawls were popular, and in 1997, orange and light green combination was in vogue. These days a lot of silver and golden thread is used in weaving the weft motifs.

An interesting development has been the modified significance of certain textiles indicative of achievement by an individual. Textiles that were traditionally associated with the warriors status or were presented to only distinguished people is now associated with achievement in the sphere of education. For example, the Chakhasang Naga warrior cloth is now (supposedly) worn only by the graduates; the Angami Nagas have recently (1997) designed a sarong – black with yellow-orange border and orange and green motif – which can be worn only by the women graduates. It is said to be a modified version of the women’s cloth (originally black with orange border) which was presented to a distinguished person.

Weaving is reflective of changes that have occurred in different spheres. Even the ‘Christian way of living’ which is seen in Nagaland now is very different from what was

⁶ ‘Hand made in India’, Crafts Council, London 1998.

proposed by the first missionaries. The missionaries had barred the converts from participating in traditional festivals, dance and songs. But now the Christian Nagas celebrate their group's main festivals. Traditional dances of the Nagas have become part of any festivity ranging from state day celebrations to events like the Baptist centenary. Today textiles have become part of every official gift exchange. To the extent that when a delegation from the North east church went to meet the Pope, they gifted Naga textiles and other accessories which were part of the traditional dress of the headhunters'.

In recent years the most visible incorporation of Naga cloth into the Christian tradition has been the use of Angami white *Lohramoshü* cloth⁷ as the ordination robe for the first Angami priest who was ordained in 1989!

To conclude, we see that a preliminary look at the textiles in the museum collection seems to suggest that they do reflect the socio-cultural changes that were occurring at the time of their collection. Some of the collectors, especially J.H Hutton and J.P. Mills, consciously selected both 'traditional' and any new kind of cloth that they came across. A detailed study of the textile collection at Pitt Rivers Museum would help us understand not only the tradition as it was at the time of collection, but it will also help us see how textile patterns reflect the religious and socio-political changes that were already underway. Complementing this with a study of contemporary trends will give us an idea of the innovations and variations that are occurring in the Naga textile tradition.

⁷ It traditionally had eight float weft motifs of different designs, but nowadays the same design is repeated in all the weft floats.

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