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Reconstruction of Indigenous Nettle (Thebvo) Weaving of the Chakhesang Nagas: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Thebvo/Sazii/Lusa in Chakhesang dialect is a stinging nettle found in the wild forest, by the river, moist land. The use of nettle fiber weaving dates back to centuries. This primitive classic 'Thebvora' is purely and naturally made of handpicked, indigenously hand spun and hand woven. The process of making a complete Thebvora/Saziikhii/Lusa (nettle shawl) need strong patience and hard work. The extraction of raw material to fiber-making has various sequential steps and religious ceremonies to be observed in the olden days before the arrival of Christianity within the tribe. Nettle shawl was the only utilitarian piece of clothing. The Chakhesang Naga women are highly skilled weavers and this continuous nettle weaving is a unique identity and aesthetic among the Nagas. The age-old tradition of Thebvo weaving form of artistry is dying today. Therefore, it felt the need of reviving and rebuilding. The past culture is a treasure trove of information about not only the practices but also of its inherent values and virtues which in modern times are unparalleled at so many levels. Globalization and westernization have adversely effected on the values and practice of indigenous weaving. This paper aims to reconstruct cultural identity, preserve tradition and local self-sustaining. The paper also attempts to investigate the traditional practices of the past society

and its continuity. The methodology used for the research paper was historical and analytical. Some villages were identified and field survey work was conducted to collect primary data. No research work can be found on Thebvo weaving of the Chakhesang Nagas although, weaving among the Nagas are found in some research work.

Keywords: Nettle shawl, Tools, Clothes, Genna, Weaving, Village.

Introduction

Chakhesang Nagas belongs to one of the 16 major tribes in Nagaland under Phek district. The Chakhesangs are often viewed as living in harmony with nature before the onset of modernization. Their traditional knowledge with nature is vast and is regarded as essential in the sustainable use of resources. Agriculture is the common occupation among the tribe. Besides agricultural activities, women are highly engaged in weaving and are highly skilled weavers. Many women opt for weaving as a livelihood, and so they work extra hard. Weaving is found to be the most developed household traditional industry within the Chakhesang Nagas. Women are not only expected to know weaving but it is her duty to meet the requirement of the family according to the standard of living and inherent or acquitted status. This by itself is a unique example of the economic division of labour. One would typically see women weaving outside their homes if they walk through the Chakhesang villages.

Thebvo/Sazii/Lusa in Chakhesang dialect is a stinging nettle found in the wild forest, river side, moist land etc. Among various species of nettle, Girardinia diversifolia is used for weaving after extraction from the barks. Girardinia diversifolia also known as Himalayan nettle is a plant species native to Nepal and it grows in Northern part of India like Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and vast part of China. It grows naturally at the elevations of 1,200, to 3,000 meters. This plant species is also widely found in North-Eastern part of India.

The use of this plant is not only limited to fiber-yielding but also for medicinal purposes. This plant is not cultivated but grows in the wild in cold regions in India. Because of its virulent stinging hairs, it is a despised plant. The use of nettle fiber can be traced back to Bronze Age in Voldtofte, Denmark 2000 years ago. The nettle fiber used for clothing is also evidence from China, Europe, Poland, Germany etc. However, as the cotton industry began to grow in the 16th century Europe, Nettle fiber declined and only during the First World War, there was a brief resurgence of nettle clothing in Germany due to the shortage of cotton. Nettle fiber was then used in stitching the uniform of German soldiers in the First World War. Though, there had been use of nettle fiber in European history, very little can be conclusively demonstrated about the historical use of nettle fiber from the physical evidence alone.

Inception of *Thebvo* Weaving

The Primitive classic *Thebvora* (Nettle Shawl) is purely and naturally made and handpicked from stinging nettle without any machine technology. It is indigenously hand-spun and also purely hand woven. The process of making a complete *Thebvora* (Nettle shawl) need strong patience and hard work. Therefore, it is increasingly rare among the Nagas. In the olden days, *Thebvora* was the only shawl and it was a utilitarian piece of clothing. Its utility ranged from blanket, bags to keep enemy's heads, adult clothing from icy winter, cover for baby, used in traditional festivals and ceremonies etc. *Thebvora* was also mainly used as a mat for paddy harvest and also to carry the paddy from the field.

There is a belief among the Chakhesang community that women should be like *Thebvora* (Nettle Shawl) in order to have a strong and good marital life. Women must be rough and strong enough to stand up and down all through her marital life. *Thebvora/Sasiikhii/Lusa* has its warm and hardy quality. It is considered as the most rough and strongest of all the Naga shawls. *Thebvo* weaving needs a long process and thus it is a tedious task. It takes almost a year to finish one shawl. From the research interview conducted at Zhavame village, Danyi Krocha narrated, during harvesting paddy, *Lusa* (Nettle Shawl in Poumai dialect) is lay spread towards the sun else, it is taboo. This taboo meant to have

bountiful harvest and abundance of paddy to consume and goodwill for the future.

From Raw Material to Refined Yarn

Nettle weaving (*Thebvora doh*) is a long process and needs lots of patience compared to other cotton or woolen weaving. The extraction of raw material to fiber making has various sequential steps:

1. Extraction of raw material: Girardinia Diversifolia or Himalayan Nettle plant is in abundance in the wild forest of Phek District. This nettle plant is harvested in the month of November, December and January after the paddy harvest. During this period, the nettle is fully matured and its flowers and leaves falls. Before the arrival of Christianity within the community, harvesting (*Thebvo*) stinging nettle was strictly prohibited and was taboo for individual to touch the nettle for harvest prior to the announcement and declaration of *"Thebvo Lezhi boh"*. '*Thebvo Lezhi boh*' is a traditional religious genna observed by the whole village to declare or permission for the making of thatch house, spinning of nettle to weave etc. The day is observed to get blessings from the supreme being as activities like cutting thatch or house making, nettle for weaving etc., begins after the post harvest. If a person delude such religious genna (*Thebvo Lezhi boh*) it is believed that misfortune comes to the village in the form of natural calamities such as storm, hailstorm destroying the paddy, house fire, disease, death, poor harvest of the year etc.



Fig.1: Nettle plant and extraction
(Image by Dikhrou Dinau)

Harvesting of stinging nettle from the wild forest is done both by male and female since time immemorial. The nettle bark is mostly 4-5 feet tall and even upto 6 feet tall. The bark cover is peeled off with bare

hand without any technology. Its skin is peeled off downwards from the tip of the bark so as the thorn does not sting and the skin does not break. In the olden days youths, both male and female (*Lezhie kro*) i.e peer group went together for extraction of nettle.

2. Sun drying and pounding on a stone: The peeled off cover from the bark is sun dried for 2-3 days depending on the sun. This is followed with pounding on the stone surface with the help of a wooden club to separate the impurities such as stinging tiny thorns or hairs on its skin. The stinging nettle then becomes soften and separable.

3. Soaking in the water: After the impurities were separated, the fiber is then soaked in water for a day. The nettle strips are then separated with hands, split into narrow slivers making it very flexible.

4. Twisting from thigh and reeled with *Lomi* (Spindle Whorl): Before the fine nettle strands are reeled into hanks, it is twisted on the thigh with hands and rolled into *Lomi*.

This process turns fiber into yarn. The *Lomi* (Spindle Whorl) is hanged and rolled with right hand. The size of the fiber determined the yarn how much was caught while twisting from Spindle Whorl. With the help of the spindle whorl, it tightens the fiber. The size of the yarn is also determined by the weaver herself.

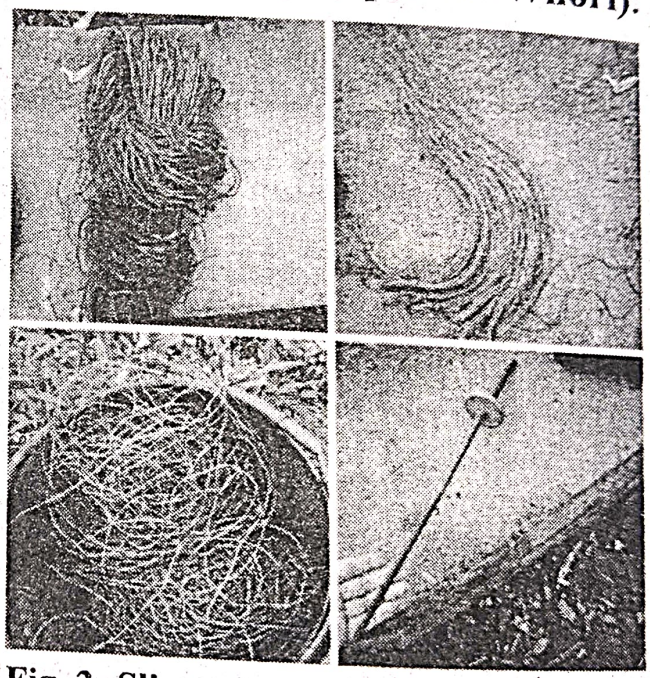


Fig. 2: Slivered and reeled with *Lomi*. *(Image by Dikhrou Diamu)*

5. Reeled into hanks with *Loh Pawhii* (a wooden tool shaped like double 'T' where yarns are twisted and turned into hanks for its strands): The nettle strands are then turned into hanks along with *Loh Pawhii*. With this process, the nettle fiber forms a continuous strand into hanks. The *Loh Pawhii* (T-shaped tool) is held upright by right hand and the left hand is filled with yarn at the cross bars of *Loh*.

Pawhii. When the yarn becomes the convenient size it is pulled out from the T-shaped tool and thus the yarn turns into particular hank.

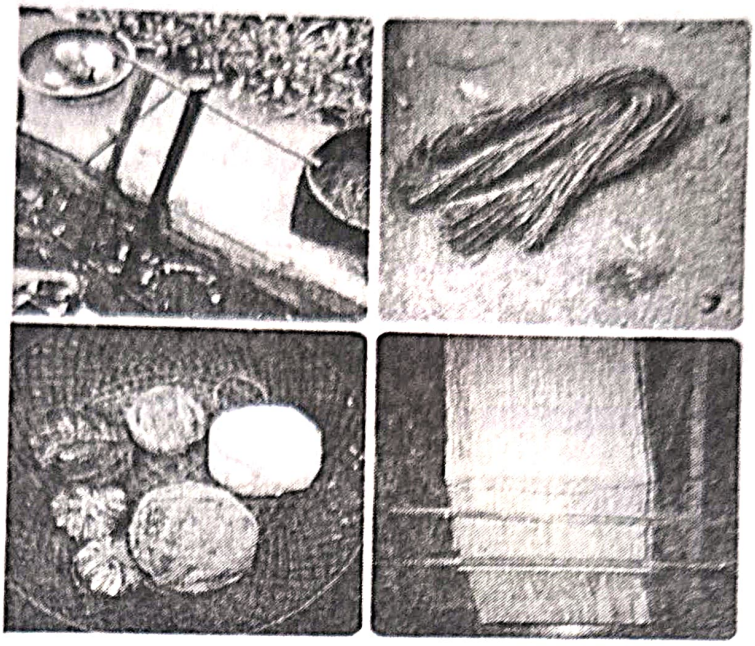


Fig. 3: Loh Pawhii into hanks, balls and rarah
(Image by Dikhrou Dianu)

6. Cooking in ash followed by cooking in rice starch: After the nettle strands formed into hanks with *Loh Pawhii* (Double T-shaped tool), it is thoroughly cooked with ash for its color and cleaned with water. The fine yarn is then finally cooked in rice starch to improve the stiffness and smoothening. The nettle strands is also cooked in rice starch in order to avoid tangle. It is then sun dried finally before it is roll into balls. Thus, the refined nettle yarn is ready to weave beautiful clothes.

Rarah (setting up for weaving) and weaving

Rarah (Kuzhale dialect) means setting up for weaving. The Chakhesang women are highly skilled weavers and this continuous nettle weaving is a unique identity and aesthetic among the Nagas. Though *Thebvo* weaving is done in a simple indigenous loom, the products are of high quality with variety of designs. The weaving process into finish product needs another complex additional patience and hard work. Most of the weavers nowadays use the portable loin loom, with few exceptional body tension looms. The

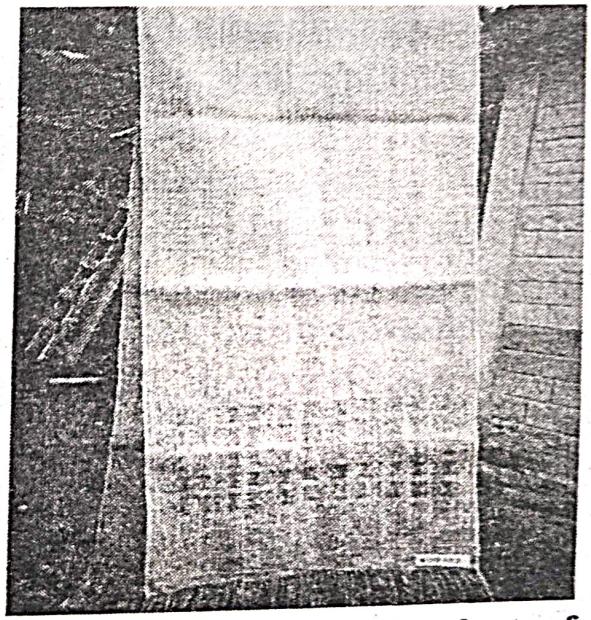


Fig. 4: One finished Product of *Thebvo nah*
(Image by Dikhrou Dianu)

loom is set in such a way that it can be easily dismantled. *Rarah* (setting up for weaving) is constructed with wooden tiny poles and bamboo sticks which vary in thickness and length measurement. After *rarah*, the weaver weaves and fill or weft threads through longitudinal warp. This process of weaving makes the weaver choose or create specific designs or patterns by selecting the strands or thread. The weaver could change the method by creating different textures. Most of the nettle shawls are alternated with cotton. The light brownish color which is nettle yarn and the white color of cotton which are mostly purchased from the market. It is strip-woven on the back strap looms skillfully.

Findings

Weaving among the Chakhesang is confined only to women. Unlike other parts of the world, it is considered taboo or forbidden for men to weave. This is because, it is believed that men would fall into prey of the enemy or misfortune. The journey from fiber to fabric is a long process and it is entirely local and self-sustaining. An interview conducted at Zapami village Pfuchiikha-u Wetsah narrated, nettle shawl weaving is a self-sustaining and it has boosted her economic condition such as expenditure for children's education, household maintenance etc. She also added that she makes around 70 thousand rupees annually only from nettle *Thebvo* weaving. From the research interview conducted among the Chakhesang villages, Chizami, Zhavame, Leshemi, Zapami are the most who are in highly practice of *Thebvo* weaving till today. The unique clothing of *Thebvo nah* (nettle clothes) is in high demand and that weavers used to get high orders from various parts of the world but due to tedious and long process, weavers hardly weave to sell it. One of the most refined making of *Thebvo nah* (nettle clothing) can be found in Zapami village for which all the clothing are labeled standardly. The nettle weaving artistry at Zapami village has an NGO as *"Thebvo Group"* which was formed in 2004 comprising of 14 weavers. Sometimes the members get few financial help from the government in terms of loans. Nettle fibers were also being purchased from individuals amounting per kilogram from 6 thousand to 18 thousand rupees depending on the size of the strand and the quality. Today, nettle made cloths varies in different finished product such as men's shawl, female *mekhala* suits

(female wrap-around) men's coat, bags, men's stole etc. Nowadays, the best quality nettle *mekhala* suit for women cost upto 28 thousand rupees and men's waist-coat upto 12 thousand rupees. The indigenous *Thebvo nah* (nettle clothing) can be used for developing fashion apparel, handicraft products, home textile etc., to the international level. This on the other hand could preserve the rich culture and indigenous knowledge of sustaining resources. "The Leshemi village origins of nettle-weave cloths collection has been exhibited at the IMC Fashion Show 2018, Textile Society of America, Vancouver 2019, Japan 2019 (Artisans' Center, 2019). Unlike the olden days *Thebvora/Saziikhii/ Lusa*, nettle weave cloths which were woven only for shawls, nettle weaving today are done in such modern contemporary designs and in varieties of clothing that are highly expensive for which only the rich could afford to use.

Conclusion

The age-old tradition of nettle weaving form of artistry is dying today. The reasons for this are to be sought in changing order of life rather than the non-availability of natural resources or the inventive intelligence of the people to meet the modern taste. Secondly, the western dress pattern is fast replacing the indigenous one. Thirdly, the breakdown of isolation through modernization has brought the people of different groups, different community closer to each other than the olden days which has polluted and deluded the age-old traditional values. With the spread of Christianity and modernization in the 20th century, the practice of indigenous weaving is degrading and new foreign ideas and practices have disintegrated and displaced the old traditional cultural ways of life. The spread of popular western culture has shadowed on the valuable indigenous practices and values.

It is a must and worthy to preserve the age-old indigenous weaving and popularized the industry from home and the world at large. There is a great need in preservation of such indigenous weaving as they are an inherent part of our cultural heritage. The use of modern technology must be taught over in order to reduce the cost of production and time consumption. Thereby, it would be possible to commercialize

the household industry adding to the economy of the community in particular and the state in general. The government, Textile Industry and other Central bodies should provide expertise and financial assistance for such venture. Various social bodies in the village, NGOs and the community in general must all take up the responsibility of preserving, promoting and safeguarding both tangible and intangible aspects of the rich cultural heritage.

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