Ao Nagas: Crafts and folklore

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Art and craft have always been a part of life among the tribes of Nagaland. One could see this relationship very clearly. Each tribe and village has its own tale of origin among the Ao Nagas. Each tribe has its own region. This is the geographical territory, which all Nagas abide by. Each Naga tribe is further divided into various clans. People belonging to different clans of the same tribe stay together in a village and also intermarry. But people belonging to one Naga tribe cannot stay in a village belonging to another Naga tribe. Naga tribes are spread from Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh in north to entire Nagaland and also in Northern Manipur in south. Each tribe has its own language too. Within Nagaland, fourteen different Naga languages are recognised. But there are more than twenty-four being spoken. To understand each other, within the state, a common language called Nagamese has been invented. This language is a combination of Hindi, Assameese and Naga dialects.

Nagas have been a warrior community. Protecting ones village from the attacks of outside enemies as well as from tribal wars and the traditional head hunting expeditions, had been a major concern. Hence all the Naga villages were always constructed on top of the hills. The houses are built on bamboo stilts on the slope of the hills, on both side of the road. Unlike in plains, here the land is not flattened for building a house, but a flat bamboo platform for the flooring of the house is created by adjusting the sizes of various bamboos that support it on the slope of the hill. Creating a bamboo house like this is a live craft that is still practised in this area. These bamboo stilts not only support the house but also keeps it dry from the water flowing on the slope of the hill during rainy season as well as from the wild animals and reptiles to a great extent.

Mokokchung district is the region of Ao Nagas. Ungma is the oldest and largest village of Ao Nagas. The village council members believe that their ancestors came to this village from across the mountain after two days of March. They halted at river Dikhu, made a cane bridge and came across with their families, animals and household goods, twenty-one centuries ago. All Ao Naga clans have once lived in this village. It is believed that in the beginning three major clans of Ao Nagas ascended from a stone. Tongpok the grandfather of Pongener clan, Longpok the grandfather of Longkumer clan and Langchakreb the grandfather of Jamir clan, are believed to have been first three Naga men from whom the entire Ao Naga race emerged.

The first Ao settlement took place at Aounglenden; now part of Ungma village. Aoung means jungle and lendan means plain. Therefore Aounglenden meant only jungle. Thus when all the three Ao clans came to this Aounglenden from different directions, the place was only a jungle. They cleared it, built a village and lived there. When ten mothers gave birth to ten boys on a same night, it was called Soyein. Soyein means increasing population. While staying at Soyein, once a tiger killed a priest. So the Aos left Soyein and went to Koridang, which became third Ao region. Later they came back to Ungma. Today all these three areas are part of Ungma village. Ungma village today is divided into ten khels (sectors), has a school, a dance society called Naga wadir and many weavings societies. Making cane and bamboo baskets for ones own use and building bamboo houses are the crafts carried out by men while weaving fabrics like shawls, skirts are the work of the women. Ao Nagas cultivate paddy, and their festivals and lifestyle revolves around this cultivation. Some slopes of Ao Naga Hills could be seen barren, as they are cleared to carry out Jhoom cultivation. Though there is a large growth of wild bananas on the hills, the banana fibres are not made use of.

Making goats hair accessories, such as daos, spears, etc. as well as pendants for the warriors and shawl end known as Sutsongrong, were other traditional crafts practised by Ao Naga men, apart from making cane and bamboo baskets. For this purpose goats hair was traditionally dyed orange red using natural dye. For yellow, stem of dried orchid known as akong was used along with red dyed cane to make these products. Today, a few craftsmen still exist making these products as some of these products are still used. For example Sutsongrong is the end piece made using red dyed goats hair and a strip woven using red dyed cane and yellow orchid. This is still made by the craftsmen of Longsa village. The main craft of women has been to weave traditional attire such as shawls, and loincloth for men, and skirts and shawls for women. Traditionally these were woven using natural dyed hand spun cotton, which was handspun and dyed by the women themselves. These were woven on the loom. Some villages specialised in spinning and dyeing cotton yarn. This was either sold as dyed cotton yarn or as the ready shawl, as per the order.

Today almost all the shawls are woven using ready dyed acrylic yarn available in very bright and at times gaudy colours. However, they try to keep the design same as the traditional ones and try to use colours closer to the
traditional ones. But as the yarn available is thicker and too bright, the result is not as intricate as in earlier traditional fabrics. Traditionally, each design had a norms attached, to who could wear which designs and products. For example, Sutsongrong, the end piece made of dyed goat’s hair and cane, could be attached to the shawls of only head hunter, or a person who has done methun sacrifice, or the leader of the Panchayat. Each design also has a name. For example, the shawl having blue ground and black checks is named as keyisü meaning tiger shawl. It implies that the man who wears it is like a tiger. This is an Ao Naga shawl, worn by both men and women. Traditionally, this shawl was woven using cotton yarn, dyed blue using Osak (Strobilanthes flacideifolius) plant. Apart from these, Mongkotep sü, the shawl having a white band of pictorial motifs of cock, methun, spears, elephants, tigers, stars, moon, human head, etc. woven in the centre of red and black stripped shawl is a warrior shawl. The headhunters and rich men who have sacrificed methun were only entitled to wear it.

Apart from these designs meant for the rich and brave, there were designs for different age groups and for different clans. For example, Ngamu sü, a skirt having black stripes woven on red ground was worn by old Ao Naga ladies. Changki sü, a skirt with red squares woven on a blue or brown background is a design of Changki clan of Ao Nagas, while Suka sü also known as imja sü is the skirt of Jamir clan of Ao Nagas. However, during my last trip I saw these restrictions have been relaxed to a great extent. Ao Naga ladies were wearing designs not only belonging to other clans of their tribes, but also of the other Naga tribes. Even the special shawls such as Mongkotep sü (the warrior shawl) was worn by many and are now sold in emporias for anyone to buy and wear. Nagas are all Christians, so during, before and after Christmas entire Nagaland has a big vacation. Apart from celebrating X’mas, Muastzü and Chungremong are the other two festivals celebrated by the entire community together. These two festivals, are related to agriculture. Muastzü originally used to be a six-day festival, but now it is celebrated only for three days on 1,2,3 May. Muastzü means blessing day. The festival is celebrated to worship god to bless all paddy and vegetable seeds so that a good crop may grow. This festival is celebrated while sowing seeds. Chungremong is celebrated at the harvesting time to bless the ready crop. It is celebrated from 1 – 3, August every year. The entire village gets together, dancing, singing, feasting and also a tug-off-war between men and women known as Arü atsuba, take place during these festivals. During dancing and celebrations, Ao Nagas wear their traditional costumes as well as special ornaments and garments of bravery, richness, etc. These are the occasions which still keep the tradition continuing, due to which the traditional crafts of preparing special ornaments and accessories made using natural dyed goat’s hair, cane and special natural dyed shawls, skirts, etc. are surviving to some extent.

However, it is a totally a different world that one gets to see during such festivities. In daily life the youngsters have now adopted more to the urban and western attires. The elder ones also are now wearing mixed attire such as wearing a western blouse on a traditional skirt. Shawls as mentioned earlier are now largely woven using bright acrylic yarn and are used with lesser restrictions than earlier. Thus loin loom weaving craft has survived but craft of basketry and making cane and goat’s hair accessories for their own use has reduced to a great extent due to the newer (more urban) lifestyle they have started adopting.

Moatsu Mong festival