

## Symbolic meaning of Naga traditional clothing

Mhonyani Sangma

Department of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, Telangana, India  
mhonyani@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*The Nagas are celebrated for their vibrant and intricately designed clothings with each tribe having its own distinct costumes, motifs, designs and dress pattern. Each of the Naga tribe is distinguishable from the traditional clothing they adorn. The various traditional clothings of the Nagas are symbols of their cultural as well as their individual identity. Each cloth had its own special meaning which determined the status of the wearer. Wearing of traditional attires was bounded by strict social customs. Clothing restrictions and taboos were observed against wearing certain clothes because of their associated symbolic meanings. Violating the socially enforced clothing norms was seen as a grave offence. Heroism and being possessors of fertility is a highly pursued quality and these cultural values are reflected in their clothings. An attempt therefore, is made to understand the social values, beliefs, traditions, the social significance of Naga traditional clothings and associated aspects to gain a better insight in understanding the Naga society as a whole. An effort is made to highlight how each of the Naga traditional clothing's is not just part of personal adornment but symbolically linked to their cultural practices like head-hunting and feast of merit which is an important feature of the Naga culture.*

**Keywords:** Naga, traditional clothing, symbols, head-hunting, feast of merit, fertility, social status.

### Introduction

All cultures dress the body in some form, and clothing and dress are central to the ways bodies are managed and expressed. They are the vestimentary envelope that presents the body in a social setting. As a result there is a constant interplay between the body and dress, with the two operating dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress<sup>1</sup>. Clothing draws the body so that it can be culturally seen, and articulates it in a meaningful form<sup>2</sup>. Through clothes, identities are shaped in all their aspects: economic status, class belonging, taste and personality are all conveyed into, and mediated by, the presentation of the dressed body. Clothes constitute the self, and the individual portrayed in a photograph incorporates that self and makes it permanent<sup>3</sup>. Clothes serve as a non-verbal language and can communicate the personality of the wearer. Through the clothes we wear we can portray an image of ourselves and how we want others to perceive us.

It is an indicator of who we are and what we represent in the society. The way a person dress has a huge impact on the way others perceive them. Dress speaks volumes about the personality of the person. What a person wears can give an insight on who they are.

As Lee<sup>4</sup> also noted, "Dress functions as a primary means of non-verbal communication" emitting constant, complex social messages that would have been intended by the wearer and understandable by the viewer. Clothes are so eminently malleable; we shape them to construct our appearance. There is

an experiential dimension to the power of clothing, both in its wearing and viewing<sup>5</sup>.

### Methodology

Observation method, both participant and non-participant was applied. This method helped the researcher in validating the information given out by the respondents. Interview method was also used to collect data. Structured interviews as well as unstructured interview technique were employed for collecting the information. A total of 479 samples were selected for the study.

Data regarding the family type of the sample population is presented in Table-2.

**Significance of the study:** Anthropological work on clothing for a long time got very little attention and is comparatively an unexplored area. Very few anthropological studies have been carried out in this area of research.

An attempt is therefore made to highlight the significance of clothing and how it can be used as a medium in understanding the socio-cultural aspects of the Naga community. There is also a need to collect valuable data with regard to Naga clothing to preserve the rich Naga cultural traditions before it gets disintegrated due to rapid modernisation.

**The Nagas:** The Nagas are an ethnic group inhabiting the state of Nagaland. Nagaland a mountainous state with lush green valley's is situated in the north-east part of India surrounded on

its sides with Myanmar in the east, Assam towards the west, Arunachal Pradesh, a part of Assam towards the north, and Manipur towards the South. Nagas comprises of sixteen major tribes and sub-tribes, each with its own traditions, customs, and practices. They are the Angami, Ao, Lotha, Sumi, Rengma, Chakhesang, Chang, Khamniungan, Konyak, Phom, Sangtam, Yimchungrü, Zeliang, Pochury, Kuki and Kachari.

**Table-1:** Distribution of the sample population based on age and sex.

Age	Male	Female	Total	Male %	Female %
0-5	8	2	10	3.5%	0.79%
6-10	5	4	9	2.2%	1.5%
11-15	10	3	13	4.4 %	1.1%
16-20	15	6	21	6.6%	2.3%
21-25	19	26	45	8.3%	10.3%
26-30	36	38	74	15.8%	15%
31-35	42	66	108	18.5%	26.2%
36-40	14	16	30	6.1%	6.3%
41-45	5	14	19	2.2%	5.5%
46-50	13	17	30	5.7%	6.7%
51-55	7	19	26	3%	7.5%
56-60	22	27	49	9.6%	10.7%
60 plus	31	14	45	13.6 %	5.5%
Total	227	252	479	47.3%	52.6%

**Table-2:** Family typology and distribution of families.

Family Type	No. of Families
Nuclear family	114
Joint family	Nil
Single member family	1

**Traditional Naga clothing and its associated symbolic meanings:** Traditionally the Naga society was socially stratified and clothes served as symbols to define people’s social class. There was distinction in body adornments on the basis of the social position of the wearer. The status and privileges had to be earned through his achievements and merit and not fixed by birth as in the case of ascribed status. A person in the Naga

society was entitled to adorn themselves with valuable clothing’s depending on the status achieved by the person through ‘head-hunting’ and ‘feast of merit’.

**Head-Hunting:** Nagas were a warlike tribe with constant warfare within the region. They were engaged in inter-tribal feud. Head-hunting was an integral part of their culture. Due to the practice of head-hunting there was hostility within the neighbouring villages, between the tribes and outside the region. The Naga villages were built on hill tops or on higher elevations and their villages were fortified as protection against their enemies. It was the responsibility of men to safeguard the village from the adversaries. Men guarded the village gates keeping careful watch of any possible danger and alerted the village. In the past, women going to the fields were accompanied by guards as protection from enemies. Fetching water is a part of women’s activity and women usually stayed together in groups when walking long distances to the water sources for the fear of being attacked by the enemies as women’s head was considered a prized trophy among the Nagas. Heads of women and children were considered of high value as it proved that the head hunters succeeded in getting past the heavily guarded village.

The main purpose of head-hunting was because of the belief that the head carries the “soul matter”. As a result, head-hunting was practiced to acquire the soul matter which Nagas believed resided in the head. Taking an enemy’s head was believed to bring wealth and prosperity. For increasing the fertility of the village it was considered essential to bring the soul matter that contained in the human head. Rituals were performed for bountiful harvests and fertility in the village. The Nagas believed that the survival and the continuity of their village depended on attracting the life force inherent in nature through the acts of taking human head. The head of the enemies was taken as prized trophies. Heads of women and children were also not spared but taking the head of infirm and insane person was a taboo for the Nagas.

Head-hunting was a symbol of masculinity. Men were required to display their manhood through bravery and courage. Bravery, Strength, courage, virility, masculinity are the qualities which were greatly admired and highly prized. Every man in the village except men with disabilities was required to join in the warfare. Refraining oneself from the battle was considered disgraceful. There was prestige attached to taking heads and the head hunters boastfully displayed their trophies. A man who distinguished himself by taking many heads rose in status and prestige and was very much respected within the community and those not very successful in their pursuit were ridiculed. The head hunters were given respect and recognition in the society for their heroism. Every Naga men aspired to become a great warrior. The warrior enjoyed a prominent position in the society with the greater number of heads he acquired during warfare. The act of taking an enemy’s head was regarded as bringing honour to the village and through their heroic deeds

increasing the fertility of the village. Along with power and glory, the war was also waged over territorial disputes and possession of land. The head hunters are believed to occupy an honourable place even afterlife.

In the Naga society, the head hunters were motivated to take an enemy's head not only to bring fertility in the village but also because of the fact that the society accorded them with special status and entitlement to wear distinctive attires and ornaments. The head hunters were entitled to adorn special attires, ornaments, weapons, head gear symbolising their triumphant pursuit in head-hunting.

**Feast of merit:** Feast of merit was practiced by almost all the Naga tribes. But the ritual act of performing a feast of merit differed from tribe to tribe. In traditional Naga society for a person to elevate his status and acquire the right to wear prestigious shawls and ornaments, he had to undertake successive stages of feast giving which is known as the 'feast of merit'. Feast giving improved the position of the individual in the social hierarchy as a man claimed higher status through feast of merit. There is a subsequent interval after each stage as the feasts were expensive and the expense increased after every stage. With every stage of feast giving, the host and his family acquired more power and status within the village community. In addition to that, the clothings, ornaments, and house decoration became more elaborate after every stage. After the completion of the full series the feast-giver would erect a monolith or a forked wooden post outside his house or in the pathway of the village and gain himself the right to wear certain clothings, and the house of the feast-giver was also decorated with wooden engravings; a symbol marking him as a respectable affluent man within the community. The erection of monolith or forked 'Y' wooden post outside the host's house signified the completed stage of feast giving and served as fertility symbols and symbolic representation of his social status. The fertility of the rich man was believed to be transmitted to the entire village community. The feast-giver held more privileges than a commoner. The entire decision making and ritual were carried out by those who had performed the feast of merit. A man who did not perform the feast of merit was looked down upon and they occupied a low status in the social hierarchy.

**Higher status traditional clothing associated with feast of merit and head-hunting:** The social status of a person is manifested through the clothings a person wears. Desmond Morris notes "It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer"<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, traditional clothings were used as a medium of expression in Naga society to reveal the status and social identity of the wearer.

Shawls are the predominant cloth among the Nagas. The shawls are worn by both young and old and the designs of the shawl are gender and age specific. Most of the Naga shawls are woven in

red as it symbolised blood. In the past among the Nagas, a rich man adorned prestigious shawl which distinguished him from the rest of the group. The shawl symbolised pride and prestige which helped him in ascending the social ladder and was central to Naga identity. Among the Lotha Nagas, a man who had performed the feast of merit was known as an *ekhyo ekhüing* (hero) and who had not given the feast were known as *kishüroe* (commoner). An *ekhyo ekhüing* played important role in all the decision-making process within the village. He occupied a high status and enjoyed a lot of privilege within the community. A shawl known as *phanrüpsü* was worn by those who had completed the first stage of feast giving (*ozhü eyu*). The shawl is dark blue in colour with patterns in red and white or blue. There is no cloth for the second stage, but the third stage of feast giving makes the man eligible to wear the *ethasü*, a dark blue shawl with designs in red. After the completion of the full series of feast giving by dragging the stone and erecting the monolith in front of the feast giver's house, a feast-giver, and his wife is entitled to wear the prestigious shawl known as *longpensü* regarded as 'rich men's shawl' symbolising his social standing within the society.

The shawl is dark blue in colour with five horizontal lines of light blue and three narrow lines of light blue at the top and bottom. The number of lines on the shawl indicates the number of ceremonial feast performed by the wearer. When a man performs the stone dragging ritual on more than one occasion then he adds additional lines on the *longpensü* shawl which is known as *eshamsü*. It is a highly prestigious shawl marking the notable social position of the wearer. A person who had succeeded in spearing an enemy and had completed the first stage of feast giving wore a shawl known as *jümthesu*. The Lotha priest (*pvüiti*) wore a special red shawl with broad black and narrow blue bands called *pvütisu* indicating his high status in the society.

Among the Lotha Naga, *rikyüsü* a prestigious shawl woven in red and dark blue yarn was worn by the warrior who brought victory to the village by taking a head or by rich men who has performed the feast of merit. *Rikyüsü* is similar to the rich men's shawl worn by the Ao Nagas. The centre of the shawl was stitched in white yarn and has a symbolic representation of a human head, head of an elephant, tiger, *mithun* horns, hornbill and other birds which were painted on it.

The warrior shawl of the Ao Nagas is known as *mangkotepsü* or *tsüingkotepsü*. The shawl was entitled to be worn only by a warrior who had taken heads in warfare and rich men who have given the feast of merit as a symbol of power and their ranking in the society. The shawl reflects the symbolic and cultural significance of the Ao Naga society. It was a perceived marker of one's social position and an important status symbol. It is worn only by the men folk. The shawl consists of three pieces of cloth which are woven from red, black and white yarn and are stitched together. The shawl has a median white band and on each side are horizontal bands of black and red. The median

white band is more elaborate and embellished than the other two pieces. It is painted with motifs in black by particular men specifically assigned for the purpose. Each of the motifs in the shawl has symbolic meanings attached to it, symbols which were part of their everyday lives. The human head depicted in the shawl signifies the number of heads taken and the wearer's achievement in head-hunting. It was a symbol of his courage and bravery. The *chabili* indicated the currency used by the Ao Nagas; the cock in the shawl is a sign of smartness of the warrior. The *mithun* symbolises the wealth of the wearer. The lion, tiger, and elephant depicted in the shawl is a symbol of strength, status, power and valour. *Dao* and spear symbolise the weapons used during warfare. Celestial bodies like star, sun, and moon was a symbol of luck, fame, and power of the warrior and the distinction of the warriors. Hornbill, the bird revered by the Nagas for its splendour and beauty, is also depicted in the shawl.

The drongo birds are noted for its bravery so the motif of drongo is painted only in the shawl of courageous warriors for defending the village against enemies. Shawl decorated in drongo bird motif was earned by a warrior who excelled in warfare. It needs to be mentioned that the technique of painting on clothes was known only by few Naga tribes like the Ao, Lotha, and Rengma. The task is carried out only by men and they are required to be chaste and observe dietary restrictions. These practices are associated with the concept of ritual purity and can be seen as a cleansing ritual.

The Ao Nagas wear another prestigious shawl known as *rongsusü*. The pattern of the shawl includes narrow bands of alternating dark blue and red colour with bunch of red coloured goat's hair and edged with tassels of red and black dyed goat's hair and adorned with cowries. It was not easy to acquire the right to wear this shawl as it was worn only by a man whose father and grandfather have both performed the full series of the feast of merit including himself. Traditionally for the Ao Nagas, clothing decorated with cowries was a means to display higher status as it signified martial achievements of warriors who succeeded in burning down the village of an enemy.

An ornate shawl known as *chi pi khwü* or *thüipikhü* was worn by the Chakhesang Nagas but only by those who had performed the feast of merit. The shawl is associated with power and status and cannot be worn by everyone. In the past, a wealthy man acquired the privilege to wear this shawl only after hosting feasts to the entire village. The shawl is predominantly black and bordered in orange colour. The shawl is embroidered all over with colourful floral and animal motifs, each colour and each motif having a deep symbolic meaning. The colours used in the shawl are orange, white, yellow, green and black. Orange is used to represent vigour, white is symbolic of purity and courage, yellow represents wealth and prosperity, green symbolises life and black represent the sacred. The elephant in the shawl is a symbol of wisdom and strength. The peacock depicted in the shawl is symbolic of beauty; the representation

of butterfly is a symbol of joy. *Mithun* head carved out of wood adorned in a rich men's house is also represented in the shawl. Flower in the shawl represents emotions like happiness and fulfilment; the star is a symbol used to signify the charisma. The traditional plate displayed in the shawl symbolises abundance and wealth. Ivory armlets, conch shells, cowries which are symbolic of a rich men's status are also embroidered on the shawl. After each successive stage of feast giving, the rows of motifs are added in the shawl. In the olden days, it was believed that the women engaged in embroidering the motifs should complete the task within a day before dusk. They held the belief that not completing the assigned work led to misfortune to both the wearer and the weaver. On the basis of merit, the feast-giver and his wife achieved a higher status in the society entitling them to wear the *chi pi khwü* or *thüipikhü* shawl and the privileges that came along with it.

## Results and discussion

The findings suggest that red colour is predominantly used in all Naga textiles because of its symbolic association with blood. The colour red is also symbolic of success in war, power, masculinity, fierceness, bravery, courage and fertility. Symbol of the human head is also commonly featured in all forms of Naga art depicting the Naga custom of head-hunting. Naga society being patriarchal, the superiority of the male members were seen to be reflected in their traditional clothing's as they were more elaborate and carried more symbolic meanings. Men in traditional Naga society were viewed as protectors of the community and therefore high status were accorded to them.

The clothings of warriors and feast-givers in traditional Naga society speak of their achievements. It reveals the higher social position of the warriors and feast-givers. They were accorded high status because of the fact that they were seen as carriers and transmitters of fertility. Fertility is the main essence which underlies all aspects of Naga art and craft.

## Conclusion

The advent of the British and the introduction of Christianity within the state brought significant changes in the Naga society. The Nagas were animist by faith before the coming of Christianity. Their life revolved around propitiating the spirits and deities. However, with the coming of the new religion, the Christian missionaries condemned and discouraged the Nagas from following the age-old practices. As a result, the new religion threatened the social fabric of the Naga society and was responsible for the loss of many Naga customs and traditions. The traditional way of feast giving is no longer practiced by the Nagas. It lost its social significance after the Nagas conversion into Christianity. Similarly, head-hunting was a prominent feature of the Naga culture. It continued till the beginning of the twentieth century but later abolished with Christianity. Certain shawls and ornaments which were socially restricted to only some privileged individuals have been relaxed and have lost its

cultural essence and done away with. In the present society it can be worn by anyone. Many aspects of the Naga culture were abandoned because of the new religion. The social significance of the clothing's, body adornment and the underlying shared values disintegrated and lost its cultural meanings. Socio-cultural changes resulted in the creation of new motifs and meanings, thus reflecting the changing times. The age-old

traditions have been replaced by Christian rites and rituals. With the adoption of the new religion, Christian values have become more pronounced in present Naga society.

To conclude, a study on clothing helped us in gaining deep insight into the socio-cultural and religious practices thereby helping us in better understanding the society as a whole.

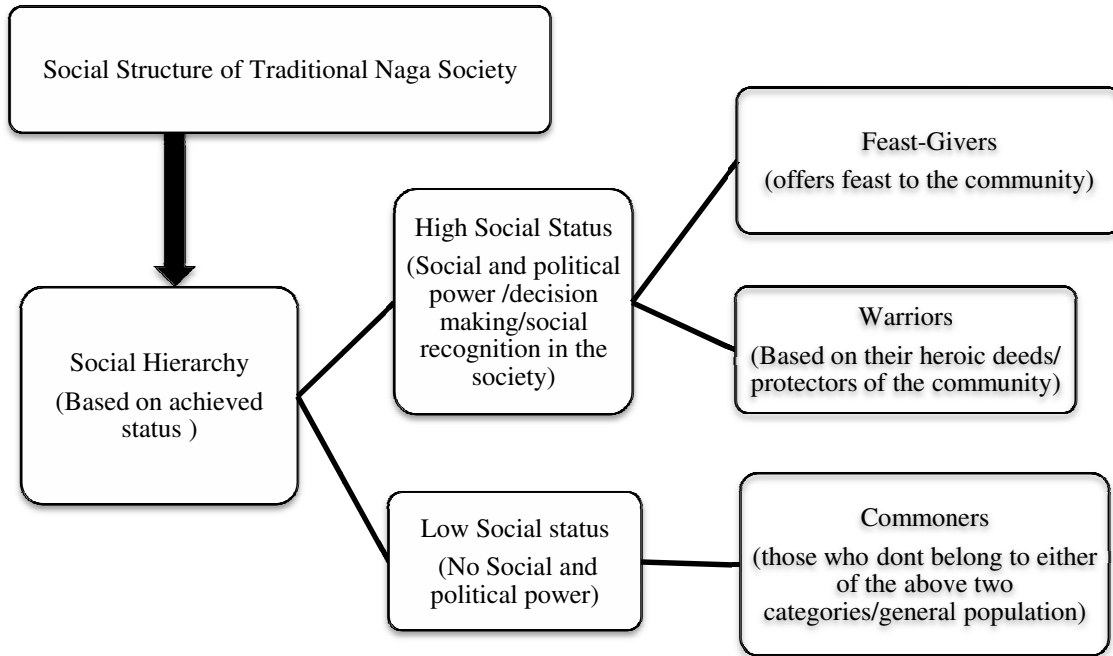


Figure-1: The social structure of traditional Naga society.

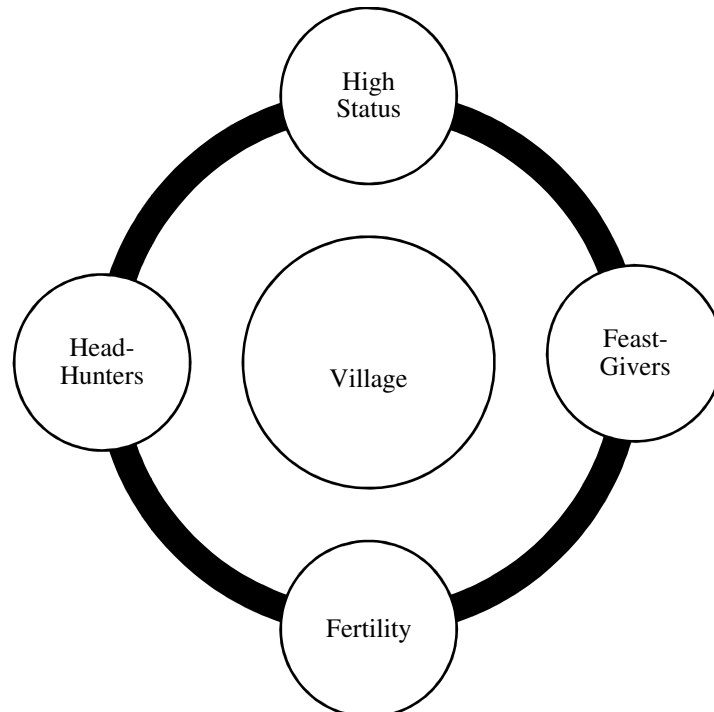


Figure-2: Representation of transmission of fertility.

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