

Traditional Womens Costumes in the Dances of the Gaan-Ngai Festival: A Study on Symbolic Interactionism

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Abstract

The traditional attire of a particular community plays a pivotal role in identifying its culture and identity. The purpose of the study is to find the symbolic meaning and aspects that influence the use of specific traditional costumes during dance performances in Gaan-Ngai festival. The data are collected with ethnography approach and have applied Symbolic Interactionism. The location for the study comprises two villages, namely Kakhulong, Imphal West district, and Thanagong, Khoumum Sub-division, Noney District, Manipur. The study was conducted during celebration period of Gaan- Ngai festival. It is found that it is the parochial religion, myth, occasions, and ceremony that influence the use of this particular traditional attire. The study also explores the meaning behind the body of the traditional costumes : symbolisation, myth, perceived belief systems, values and social norm.

Keywords: Gaan-Ngai; Langhu pheisoi; Symbolic interaction.

Introduction

The Gaan- Ngai festival is one of the biggest festivals of Kabui / Rongmei tribe in Manipur. The festival is associated with rites and rituals, and cultural activities such as dance, folk songs, and sports of the Kabui / Rongmei Community. With "Gaan" signifying winter or dry season, and "Ngai" denoting festival, the name "Gaan-Ngai" indeed reflects the essence of celebration of winter. "When the granaries are full, the landscape is dry, the whole village is free from all agricultural works, people turn to celebration, festivity and worship of the God and honouring of the dead (Kamson 4)". The Gaan-Ngai festival is celebrated for 5 to 7 days depend-

ing on the decision of the villagers. In the past, the festival was celebrated in the month between October and December annually depending on the progress of the agricultural activity but today, the Kabui/Rongmei people living in Manipur are now celebrating it on the 13th day of the Manipuri Lunar month of Wakching (tenth month in Manipuri calendar) which mostly falls in January and sometimes in the month of December. As this paper focuses on the traditional attire worn during the dance performances in the festival, there are many forms of dances performed during the festival. The dances performed are known as "Tamchan Laam" (Honouring the God's dance), "Khangbon Kadi Laam" (farewell dance to Khangbon, leader of the Khangchu¹), "Thei Kadi Laam" (Dance in honour of the dead), "Phaak-Gang Laam" (farewell dance to a bride), "Pazeimei" (Waving of the sash by the youth).

The Kabui/Rongmei are one of the Tibeto Burman indigenous ethnic groups living in the Northeast Indian state of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. They are politically categorized as a part of the Naga people of the North-East India. They follow their traditional religion, known as Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (In short TRC).Tingkao Ragwang means Heavenly, the supreme God. So, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak means religion of Tingkao Ragwang. There are approximately 29000 to 30000 people still following this parochial religion. According to Kamei (106), TRC is a primordial religion with a primordial existence, existing since the beginning of time, ancient and eternal. It is almost equivalent to the Sanskrit word "Sanatan Dharma" meaning an ancient and eternal religion. Moreover, Lanbilung also asserted that the religion of Tingkao Ragwang is embodied with doctrines, dogmas and norms revealed by diviners, religious teachers, gods and goddesses and deities of the lower realm (1).

Literature-review

Culture is defined as an umbrella term having elements of the customs, belief systems, tradition, morality, attitudes and institutional set ups etc. Individuality or identity of a person or a collective activity of a community is usually a facet of culture. Different societies adopt different unique traditions. Among all cultural artefacts, clothing occupies a special attention in the cultural studies. It is not only a non-verbal communication reflecting class, ethnicity, profession and gender, it also acts as a body of metaphorical manifestation when connected with deep cultural activities like rituals or spirituality. Culture of any society has its own distinctive identity as expressed and manifested in the humanistic dimension of artistic forms which are usually expressed in clothing and fashion.

Kuutma asserted that ethnicity is an observable and instrumental element of cultural communication and festival performance serves the purpose of the articulation of the group's heritage and culture. It can be seen as a communicative setting where participants and performance interact within a public context. The activities carried out during a festival reflects the concerns of the community, thereby providing a spectacle for expressing particular ethnicity while suggesting personal affirmation, political action, social revitalization (79).

Dzramedo affirms that clothing is often regarded as a deeply personal aspect of an individual's life. It serves as a means of self-expression and reflects the social activities and cultural norms of a specific time period. From a socio-cultural perspective, clothing is influenced by three main factors: the individual's physical body, the cultural context of their community, and the broader universe or world in which they exist (2).

"Cultural values and identities are symbolically expressed in many contexts and passed on to generations. Without symbols, it would not be able to maintain the collective wisdom of past generation, and consequently generations would be prone to repeat the mistake of performance. Symbols tie together people who otherwise might not be part of a unified group" (Samovar et al. 41-42). Such symbolisms are usually reflected in clothing, mannerism and other non-verbal structures.

Carey suggested that symbolism often manifest in clothing, behaviour and other non-verbal forms. Symbolism, seen as a part of communication, is regarded as a process that, aided by technology, can spread knowledge, ideas, and information rapidly and extensively, at times serving religious objectives, to control both space and people (17).

Omatseye and Emetiewen also asserted that clothing serves as a visual depiction of a society's history, oral traditions, ethical belief, social values, and political philosophy. Essentially, garments function as a non-verbal method of communication, comprehensible to those who utilize them. While some clothing is adorned purely for its visual appeal, others carry portent for the intrinsic aesthetic in its symbolic and metaphorical import (57).

These clothing and various forms of bodily adornment are expressed in the forms of signs, symbols and iconography which served as non-verbal but visual forms of expressing their habits, thought, techniques and conditions that characterize society as a whole (Dzramedo 4). While, dif-

ferent cultures have different costumes and fashion history that identify them, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated, using clothes and adornments as a means of communicating for their social and personal status; it is the culture of the people that marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity. (Dzramedo et al. 1). Nilolenko also suggested that in a compact symbolic form, ornament acts as multi-functional communication means that can not only provide information about the cultural history of an ethnic group, but also a powerful factor of self -identification in the society, contributing to further inculturation and spiritual self- development (158).

Stockhausen affirms that among all Naga groups a distinction is made between dress for daily use and dress for festive or other special occasions. Depending on the event and the purpose of the gathering, different sets of ornaments and body clothes were woven at different times (387).

“Every traditional piece of Naga wear is an expression of the Naga philosophy of life, world-view and traditional values. Naga cloth and traditional Naga attire express a great sense embedded in and shaped by the natural environment-a heightening of their deep awareness and understanding of being part of nature. Moreover, ornament and dress have been used for centuries to communicate bravery, prowess, wealth, rank and prestige in various social spheres (Stirn and Ham 152)”. Kamei also asserted that the Zeliangrong², ornaments are more than a matter of aesthetics, it is the identity of individual and groups, it helps statements, definition. Indeed, ornament are part of the definition of being truly human, because it is only from a corpse that ornaments are removed (4). “The material culture of Kabui/Rongmei following Tingkao Ragwang religion had the functional value of organizing the civil society of the people during their historical days, helping in strengthening its moral, aesthetic and ideological foundations (Kamei 4)”.

Research Objectives

- i) To study the artistic design and essence of the body of traditional costumes used by women in dance performances of Gaan-Ngai festival.
- ii) To discuss the symbolic interactions of dance costumes in the cultural milieu of Kabui/ Rongmei tribes.

Methodology

The people of Kabui/Rongmei have a rich cultural tradition. There are various cultural communication aspects that is involved with their rich traditional clothing worn by both male and female during the Gaan-Ngai festival

The study has applied ethnography methodology and processed the data with symbolic interactionism. Critical observation and personal interviews had been used to gather the details of the cultural artefacts and extract the meaning of the traditional clothing pieces used in the dance performances in Gaan-Ngai.

Data collection had been made from two sites in Manipur: one in Thanagong village, Khoupum Sub-division, a hilly area in Noney District in January 2022, and another one in Kakhulong village, Imphal West, in January 2023. Both sites are in Manipur.

Through the observation method, the fine details of traditional attire, ornaments and its colour, pattern, design had been noted.

The participants of Interview were two weavers, two village priests (Muh) and two village elders. The selected participants played a significant role in exploring the minute details of the meaning, myths, context and symbolism tied to these cultural artifacts especially the traditional attire used during the festival of Gaan-Ngai.

Conceptual Framework

Collection of cultural artefacts for the posterity especially clothes and study of the aesthetics, and its metaphorical connections is the basis of the study. Panofsky's theory of iconography rightly stays tune to the study. Art manifested in the cultural artefacts brought in a metaphorical way to execute cultural rites for a community in a sacred way is the spectacle of the festival. The exploration of deeper meaning in a way like Panofsky's three level of understanding: primary or natural, secondary or conventional and tertiary or intrinsic is the framework of the study. The overall cultural performance of the festival will be viewed from the premises of George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism: meaning, interaction and thinking. As Blumer (1986) propounds, the first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them. People interact individually but also collectively; they do not

respond directly to objects but attach meaning to them, modify that meaning, and act on the basis of that meaning. The world and the individual human are separate but the world is interpreted by the individual through symbols during interaction. The second premise is that, individual or collectively, the meaning one makes of things arises from the social interaction one has with one's fellow. Because, meaning is founded on the way other individuals act on the basis of a shared understanding of meaning in their environment. The third is that these meanings are handled, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with things

The relevance of the celebration of Gaan-Ngai every year by Kabui/Rongmei community since ages, the meaning of the rituals, dances and other cultural artefacts resounds the deep traditional values pertaining to the community. The community members perform symbolic rites, thereby expressing a social interaction with the mother nature around and people of the community. This is the celebration of the belief and nature's bounty. As time changes, there may be slight modification of the cultural artefacts used in the ceremonial bases, but not the whole essence of the core meaning. This signifies that there is constant interaction between the environment and men and symbolic interactionism goes on.

Data Analysis

Data had been collected through keen observation of the traditional costumes worn by the women during the dance performance in Gaan-Ngai Festival. Visual ethnography has been applied. A series of photographs are taken during this dance performances besides physical keen observation. It is followed by interpretation of the symbolism of the body of work of art in the costumes. The overall description has been made from the narratives of the interviewee collected through recorders and the collected photographs. Analysis are as follows.

Langhu/ Langmu/ Pheisoichang Pheiso

It is a wrap-around garment worn by women during the dance performance in the Gaan-Ngai festival. (See Fig. No.1). It measures 250cm in length and 120 cm in breadth approx. Women wrap their bodies under the arm covering their bust, and come down to the calf. This Langhu Pheiso holds special importance and is exclusively worn on three specific occasions: weddings by the bride, during funeral for the deceased and dance performance. It is reserved exclusively for special occasions and

is not typically worn everyday or casual setting in their day-to-day lives.

It is discussed as follows.

a) Kaphok (Borders):

There are two borders in Langhu Pheiso, known as Kaphok. They measure around 20 cm in breadth and are of red colour with two white stripes running all along. (See Sl. No.1 of Fig no. 1). Tiny intricate patterns are also found on these small white stripes. These tiny patterns are known as Hu or Hiu (See Sl. No. 2 of Fig no. 2) in Kabui/Rongmei dialect. Again, these tiny intricate designs or motif are of various kinds with names: Huteng-Hu/Hiu, Hurampui-Hu/Hiu, Phaibok-Hu/Hiu, Khonglaona-Hu/Hiu, Chakhoi-Hu/Hiu, Kharou-Hu/Hiu, Kaipai-Hu/Hiu. Another intricate essential pattern found in border of Langhu is the four narrow stripes running all along its length. These tiny four stripes each on two borders are called Pheibe (See Sl. No. 3 of Fig no. 1).

Lastly, the adjoining part between the Kaphok (Border) and the Kashing (Body part) known as Mongshing has three colourful stripes in yellow, green and black. (See Sl. No. 4 of Fig no 1). Monshing in Kabui / Rongmei dialect literally means rainbow.

b) Kashing (Body part):

The body part of the Langhu Pheiso is known as Kashing. It is black in colour with three visually dominating white stripes running all along the length. These white stripes have again multiple narrow colourful stripes with red, orange and green. (See Sl. no. 5 of Fig No. 1)

c) Border on the length of Langhui Pheiso

On the two borders of the length of Langhu Pheiso, we find eight to ten thin multi-colour stripes running all along the edge. (See Sl No. 6 of Fig No. 1). These motifs or lines made of interlacing thread are known as Chekpi, Peaw, Peawkiu, Sinei and Kaipai-Hu or Chakhoi. For these stripes, Kabui / Rongmei tribes don't impose any specific colour here. The intricate pattern design varies between married and unmarried women.



Fig. No. 1 Langhu pheisoi

Fig No. 1: Langhu Pheisoi

The myth behind the traditional attire worn by males and females as told by the Lanbilung is that these people copied the garment of God and Goddess named, Didimpu and Didimpui respectively in the ritual ceremony called Tarang Banru. This festival is celebrated in the name of the mythical hero, Thonglamnang who is half- man and half-goat. It is presumed that common people saw the dresses of this god and goddess in the festival. The Goddess wore Langhu in that ceremony upon which women of Kabui / Rongmei imitated the attire.

The attire used in the dance performance in Gaan- Ngai is considered the most decorative, ornamented and costly and also regarded it as queen of all Pheishois (wrap-round dress). Different sources namely, Golmei, Longmei and Kamei claims that Lenglina, Neamneilu, and Langlianlu be the first lady who weave this dress respectively. The exact identity of this woman is still unclear, so far.

Bungkam

It is a long, narrow cloth. It is part of dance attire worn specially to tie around the waist like a belt by a female. (See Fig. No. 2). Its breadth measures around 15 to 20cm. The two borders of the Bungkam are in multiple colours, measuring around 4cm and the mid portion is white. The edge of the cloth is designed with stripes of different colours and are intricately embroidered. Red and yellow threads hang freely at the fringe. This piece of cloth was also used in the olden days by Kabui/Rongmei during fieldwork or other physical work, but now it is only used during dance performances (Kamei). The purpose of the bungkam is to make sure the

skirt/ wrap round does not fall and to ward off men from the evil spirit.



Fig No. 2: Bungkam

Phangphei

This is a single piece of cloth worn around the chest of women (See Fig No. 3). The fabric is primarily black with a minimal design. The two end-pieces of the cloth is adorned with fringes in red colour, tasselling with yellow yarn. This cloth is an essential part of the traditional dance attire worn by women. Phangphei is mainly worn by fully grown women but, unmarried; as it signifies the beauty and elegance of women. This particular cloth is not meant for married women (Longmei).

Phangphei in the olden days made use of Goat's or Horse's hair, dyed in red, along with yellow orchid bark to tassel the fringes of the cloth. But it is replaced with modern-day yarn. Further, it was also used in day -to-day life to tighten the part of the breast/chest. In other words, it is a form of modern bra (Kamei).



Fig No. 3: Phangphei

Beithinglem

It is the earring worn by women on various occasions, especially during dance and cultural events. It is a traditional ornament worn as a fashion statement to suit occasion. Shape is like a hoop and has incrustated white and black beads with three or four pompoms on it (See Fig No. 4). In olden days, Kabui/Rongmei people used Conch shells and bird feathers for this earring. Now, it is replaced with crystal and thread.



Fig No. 4: Beithinglem

Banteng Ta

It is a spiral-form of Bangle/bracelet worn on the wrist by women mainly during the dance to beautify their appearance. It is made of brass and comes in a simple design (See Fig No. 5). There is no specific number of loop but it can go up to 20.



Fig No. 5: Banteng Ta

Nathang

It is also an armlet in a spiral form worn around the arm and it's made of brass. It has a unique design having a head and tail, (See Fig No. 6). Nathang also comes in a simple design with 7-8 loops wherein the head is more prominent and the tail a little round.

These bangle/bracelet and armlets are only worn by unmarried women in any occasion, be it dance or traditional/cultural event. A woman after marriage is debarred from wearing it. Lungnihai asserted that specific cultural norms dictate that married women are refrain from



Fig No. 6: Nathang

wearing Bantengta (Bangle/Bracelet) and (Tadu Nathang armlet), as these accessories traditionally symbolize a woman's unmarried status and her chastity. Violating these norms could be perceived as an offense against the community's value and traditions.

Tadan Tu

It is a traditional necklace made of cornelian beads. It consists of 1 to 12 strings, depending on the individual's choice. The beads in the necklace are mainly orange colour with few big size beads of white colour, Other small beads in the necklace are of yellow and black colour. (See Fig No. 7). The numbers of strings of the necklace are more during dance performances or in special occasions. People these days are seen wearing in their day -to -day life with only single string. Tadan Tu has also spiritual purpose to ward off evil spirits.

Youth these days wear them as a fashion statement and to show off as a trademark of belongingness to Kabui / Rongmei tribe. (Kamson).



Fig No. 7: Tadan Tu

Langdaimai

It is a headwear worn only during dance performance in Gaan -Ngai. The headwear is mainly adorned as a beauty accessory for women. The design is very simple: seven feathers of hornbill makes to it. (Langdai). (See Fig No. 8). As time goes on, modern day head wear has started using aluminium or paper items in the shape of horn bill feather.



Fig No. 8: Langdaimai.

Table No. 1: Female traditional dance attire of Kabui/Rongmei Tribe.

Sl. No.	Name of the costumes	Brief Descriptions
1	Langhu / Langmu / Pheiso Chaang	Loin cloth worn as wrap-around.
2	Pheilak / Pheileg / Bungkam	Loin cloth used as waist belt.
3	Phaangphei	Loin cloth to cover the chest part of the women body.
4	Beithinglem	Traditional earring made of conch shell.
5	Baanteng Ta	Bangle made of brass worn on the wrist. There is no specific spiral but can go upto 20 spiral
6	Nathang	An armlet made of brass with 7-8 spiral.
7	Langdaimai	Head gear made of Hornbill feather



Fig No. 9: Kabui/Rongmei female in traditional dance attire.



Fig No. 10: Group of Kabui/Rongmei female dancing.



Fig No. 11: Some of the Hu (Motifs).

Discussion and Conclusion

The study identified different attires worn by females in the dance performances during Gaan-Ngai. The types of clothing for female were Langhu Pheiso (Wrap around), Bungkam (Cloth used for waist band), Phangphei (Cloth to cover chest), Beithinglem (Earring) Bantengta (Bangles/Bracelet), Nathang (Armband), Tadan Tu (Traditional Necklace) and Langdaimai (Headwear). As per the data, the Gaan-Ngai festival has emerged as a significant event where every participant showcases their traditional attire uniformly during the dance performances. This unique usage motifs/pattern signifies that this attire holds exceptional cultural significance and is highly valued among the community compared to other garments. This particular attire serves as more than just clothing; socially, it acts as a symbol of identity, equality and emotional connection among the people who wear it. Additionally, the wearing of this attire reflects a sense of pride and contentment among its people, demonstrating the deep value they attach to it.

In early days the attire was primarily crafted from material derived from plants, birds, and animals, showcasing a strong bond between the people and their natural environment. However, in contemporary society, the attire often replicates the appearance of these natural elements rather than being made directly from them, signalling a shift away from the direct utilization of natural resources in clothing and other accessories production.

The dance attire also holds profound significance, symbolizing the deep-rooted connection of the Kabui/Rongmei people to their traditional beliefs. The colours of the attire carry profound significance: red embodies strength and courage, green signifies prosperity, yellow represents protection from enemies, white symbolizes purity and simplicity, while black symbolizes darkness within the traditional context of the Kabui/ Rongmei community.

The study has extensively explored the various elements of traditional attire worn by females of the Kabui/Rongmei community during the Gaan-Ngai festival. It embodies symbols and meaning within the framework of symbolic Interactionism, and their deep-rooted connections to myths, belief, natural surroundings, values and norms within the community. Furthermore, it highlighted that these traditional garments served as non-verbal indicators of a woman's marital status, conveying this message without the need for verbal explanation.

Among these attires, the Langhu Pheiso stands out as the sole attire that has maintained its authenticity in terms of colours and patterns, while other Pheisos (Wrap-around) have undergone alterations with various colours and designs. Preserving the originality of the Langhu Pheiso is of paramount importance to individuals adhering to traditional religious practice, as these garments not only define individual and communal identity but also transmit essential beliefs and values to the younger generation. Additionally, the community's preference is to reserve the wearing of the Langhu Pheiso for the three special events, emphasizing the attire's significance and the intention to maintain its sanctity by not wearing it casually on other occasions.

The Kabui/Rongmei culture holds a deep and multifaceted relationship with their traditional cloth, using it as a means to communicate their beliefs, philosophies, and understanding of human existence. This fabric serves as a metaphor that reflects various aspects of their life, representing the connection between their inner and outer worlds. Within the cloth's design, motifs, colours, and usage, there's often a rich tapestry of messages and stories encoded, understood primarily by the cloth's owners. These intricate details of the cloth carry profound meanings that only those within the culture can decipher, revealing untold narratives and messages.

The relation between the Kabui/Rongmei people and their traditional attire isn't merely superficial; it's characterized by insightful, reflection and reciprocity. The cloth becomes a vessel for cultural expression, carrying

within it the collective wisdom and experiences of the community, forming an integral part of their identity and heritage.

Moreover, documenting the significant aspects of these set of attires become crucial, especially for the youth. Relying solely on oral traditions poses a risk of losing the intricate significance and inherent values associated with this female's dance performance attire. Hence, thorough documentation plays a pivotal role in safeguarding and transmitting this cultural heritage across generations.

Notes:

¹ Khangchu: Male Dormitory

² Zeliangrong: It is an acronym of three cognate tribe; Zeme, Liangmei and Rongmei/Kabui

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