



The Indigenous Method of Producing Yarn & Weaving Khrora/Rūlashe (Shawl Woven With Hibiscus Cannabinus' Bark) by the Khezhakeno Village of Nagaland

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Abstract:

Weaving has been practiced among the Nagas since time immemorial and continues to date. Nagas weave their beautiful costumes for different occasions such as festivals, funerals, marriages, status of merits, and everyday wear. Incorporating Nagas' costumes has always been challenging, and it takes a lot of time and energy and demands a lot of effort to complete the whole process. Given the lack of present-day technology, one can only imagine how challenging the lives of the ancestors of Nagas must have been to survive. Nagas have their traditional technology, and the methods and techniques of weaving used by the Nagas are distinct and unique. They also have their traditional way of producing yarns and weaving their costumes/attires using their standard technology. Therefore, it is crucial to study and document the unique and significant conventional weaving knowledge practiced by the Nagas and the technology involved in it. The journal will focus on the traditional/indigenous method of producing Paddy Shawl by the villagers of Khezhakeno, one of the ancestral Naga villages, including the process adopted for the cultivation of hibiscus, making the yarn, and the technology used for weaving the Paddy Shawl. The sources of this journal are primarily collected from experts who have in-depth knowledge and expertise in the indigenous method of producing Paddy Shawl from Khezhakeno Village.

Keywords: Indigenous weaving, Khezhakeno, spinning, technology, yarn

Introduction

The art of weaving is familiar to the world; looking back at history, people have practiced weaving since ancient times. It is practiced widely in different parts of the world, but the methods and techniques differ from place to place. Likewise, weaving is deeply rooted in the culture of the Nagas in the past and still plays an integral part of Naga culture even today. The colorful costume of the Nagas depicts an important symbolic role in the preservation of ethnic values and cultural heritage. Nagas have a huge array of attires ranging from colorful and vibrant to dark and dull providing a good insight into their rich and colorful life of their forefathers. Nagas plant cotton and weave shawls, loins, sash, and plants using simple tools. The Khezhakeno weavers also plant cotton as well use barks of plants in the past to weave their clothes. In the past, Nagas produce everything locally when it comes to weaving. The yarns and tools used by the Nagas for weaving their beautiful traditional attires are all handmade which are meticulously crafted. Every Naga women knew how to weave and by the time women reach the age of 13-15, they were already experts in weaving. The indigenous/traditional knowledge of weaving was passed down from generation to generation and is preserved till date. The back-strap loom persists to this day; it is the preferred method for producing the best quality clothes. Even to this day, women from Khezhakeno village are popularly known for their weaving skills and the shawls produced by them fetch a good price in the market.

Study Area

Khezhakeno is a village of the Chakhesang tribe of Nagaland, under Phek district. The village is well known as a historical site and one of the oldest migratory trajectories undertaken by some Nagas. This ancestral site derived its name from '*Khezha*' dialect Kozabomi which means the native people of Koza. The village is divided into three khels namely Chisomi Khel located in the upper part of the village, *Zhipfemi* Khel located in the middle part of the village and *Komuno* Khel which is located towards the bottom of the village. *Chisomi* Khel comprises of two sub-khels called *Tepfuno* and *Abvümi* while *Zhipfemi* khel has *Thasomi* and *Themiladumi* as the sub khels. The *Kozabomi* (people of Khezhakeno) speaks the dialect called 'Kozale'. (Koza & Sekhamo,2021,p.201)

Rülashe/Khrora

Rü in Khezhakeno dialect means Paddy and *Lashe* means shawl and it was produced from the bark of a plant called *Khronhü* (Hibiscus Cannabinus) this is the reason why it was also known as *Khrora* (Hibiscus Cannabinus shawl). The plant was locally available in the village. This shawl is one of the oldest shawl which was known among the Khezhakeno people. *Khrora* was a very important shawl which can be used for varied purposes, one of the main purposes of weaving this shawl was to carry the harvested paddy during the rice harvesting season, this is how it got its another name *Rülashe/Paddy Shawl*. This was normally woven before the harvesting season in order to prepare for the harvest as they need this shawl to enable the villagers to carry a huge load of paddy from the field to their house. *Khrora /Rülashe* was also extremely useful to the villagers of Khezhakeno as it can be used as a blanket as well as shawls during the winter as it keeps them warm. *Khrora/Rülashe* was like a wind cheater shawl as it blocks the cold wind and locks the heat of the body and can therefore keep the user cozy and warm during the chilly winters.

The process of making yarn from *khronhü*

The process of making yarn is complicated; it is a meticulous process which requires time and energy. Soon after *Khronhü* is harvested the stem is separated from the leaves and flowers. After being slashed from the stems, the slashed barks of *Khronhü* are exposed to sunlight and the barks are again stripped into thinner splits as per the desired size of the weavers. The thinner splits are soaked in water for it to be prepared as yarn with thinner and finer pieces which are twirled and rolled into balls. The balls are again dabbled into water and are dried under the heat of the sun so that the yarn becomes firmer. After it is dried, the yarn is coiled around the wooden swirling tool. It is again removed from the wooden swirl and cooked in a hot boiling *nyavonyo* (ash water) to remove the thin layered cover from the barks. To do this they use a big pot to put all the yarns and is again covered with ash and allowed to boil. The process of preparing yarn brings the whole community together and it also helps promote unity and harmony among the villagers. They announce a convenient date where all the womenfolk to beat the cooked yarn and separate it from the ash which is termed as '*khrode*.'

On the date so fixed the womenfolk of the village would proceed to a stream at a place called "*Malhayi*" located not far from the village as they require water for *Khrode*. They would identify a good spot near the

stream to get an easy passage to the stream for the purpose of *Khrode*. They use chiseled bamboo stick as a tool to beat the yarn handcrafted by the men folk in the village. This wooden block for beating the stem is well polished and has a handle which is round in shape and the rest of it is flat. This tool is light in weight which enables the women to comfortably use it during *Khrode*. Once they finish beating the yarn, it turns white in colour. The process of *khrode* takes about 3-4 hours. When it is done they take the yarn home and leave it to dry. When the yarn dries completely, they prepare for the next process by pounding rice into powder. They take the pounded rice and boil it. After this process, the yarns are dried again in the sun.

The process of weaving *Khrora/Rülashe*

When the process of turning the plant fiber into yarn is complete, it is prepared for weaving and to do that thread is warped using tools made from bamboo and wood. Warping consist of two types namely horizontal warping and vertical warping. Horizontal warping requires two persons to complete where one person will be seated while the other would carry the yarns around and wound it on the tool and pass it to the person seated. Vertical warp winding can be done by a single person. In Khezhakeno village the weavers follow the vertical warping. This process requires several sticks which are plugged to the ground or the board called *rara chi*.

Back then in the early days, weavers do not have stand/board to make warp, so instead they used to put required number of tool/stick and plug firmly on the ground and thereafter, arranges the threads to go around these sticks. They continue the process according to the required size they want. After they have taken the warp, the weaving process begins. The weavers weave their clothes from the loin loom or back strap loom which is an ingenious simple device. It is called loin loom or back strap loom because the warped yarns are stretched between two parallel bamboo/wood and the wood/bamboo at one end is fixed to the stand and the other end is held firmly by means of strap worn around the lower waist of the weaver. When the process of weaving begins, the weavers try not to waste any time. The back strap or the loin loom is commonly used for weaving. The weavers concentrate and devote their time fully to complete the weaving of the shawl as they race against time to catch up with the harvesting season.

The size of the thread is thick, and the woven clothe is warm and strong at the same time. *Rülashe* does not have patterns and designs but towards the beginning and the end they leave tassels of thread hanging on the edge. *Rülashe* is light brown in color. To weave one *Khro* so/10 yarns.

Hardship faced by the weavers:

Nagas are mostly farmers and live a simple and hard life. Rough geographical terrain makes it challenging for the farmers to cultivate crops. Even in the case of cultivation of *Khronhü*, women undergo a lot of hardships and face injuries on their hands and feet as they do not wear footwear in the past. They are compelled to carry heavy load from their fields to their home.

The weavers used to roll *Khronhü*'s fiber from their thigh which is painful after continued process and joining the pieces together. Ash as well as their saliva was used to roll the fiber for better result. This is why when they roll this fiber, the weavers' thighs become red as they need to press it hard to roll and join the fiber firmly. The weavers use ash to prevent the yarn from slipping, while rolling it, because continuous process of rolling makes the thigh slippery and affects the quality of the yarn. This process of rolling the yarn and joining the fiber together is called '*mülü*' in Koza dialect.

A weaver faces a lot of back problems because of weaving which requires their back support to hold the warped yarns by means of a strap worn around the lower back of the weaver while weaving. Most weavers who weave frequently faces injuries on their arms and heels because they have to constantly move their arms to weave the shawls and their heels have to push against the tools to strengthen the shawl. Constant concentration on the thread during weaving further affects weaver's eye sight too.

Tools used for Weaving

Lobu- Upper beam, *Kepechi*- Lower Beam, *Kizhiechi*- Coil Rod, *Lopu* – Bamboo Roller, *Lonyiichi*- Heddle Rod, *Lojo*- Shed Stick, *Lo mutsiichi*- Stick Shuttle, *Kaphu*- Back strap. The weavers use the strong post/beam of their house to carry out the weaving process. They will find strong rope to support warp yarns and they used to carry out the weaving process. They also used *lechirho*, a creeper which is quite strong and cannot be broken with bare hand. This creeper has green leaves and can be found in the village. But with the

passage of time, weavers have come to use the present day stand where they put the weaving yarn to carry out the weaving process. The use of this stand has made weaving a little more comfortable and easy.

Work Distribution:

Weaving falls within a woman's domain; only weaving gear and associated paraphernalia are prepared by her man. Weaving is the most tedious process when home-grown cotton is used. Nowadays, commercially produced ready-made yarns are available and affordable, making traditional thread-production methods obsolete as cotton cannot grow at high altitudes. It is, however, important to understand the indigenous process employed by the native Nagas during the pre-contact period, as these form part of their cultural stock, and continued to be used in post-colonial days, up to few decades ago. The back-strap loom- the universal Naga weaving technology- is still in vogue, and in fact is the only preferred method for producing high-quality clothes, one at a time. (V.Nienü 2013,p. 285-86)

The process of cultivating *Khronhü* begins with clearing of the jungle; plough the field on the dry land. This was followed by planting the seeds by March. By the month of July and August the plant matures and is ready for harvest. *Khronhü* usually grows as tall as 5-6 feet in height. Soon after *Khronhü* is harvested they prepare it for making the yarns for weaving. Unlike other parts of India, where much of the spinning and weaving is in the hands of man, spinning and weaving in Nagaland is exclusively done by women. In the past, one of the major roles of women in Khezhakeno village was weaving. This responsibility of women was equally important as taking care of the children, doing household chores, helping in the field etc. Women are at tasks from clearing the jungle, plough the field, planting *Khronhü* 's seeds which they preserved and soon as the plant/*Khronhü* matures, they harvest it. Thereafter, the process of making yarn, spinning and weaving follows. The tools used in producing the shawls are handcrafted by the men folks. These tools are not only used for weaving *Khrora/ Rü Lashe* but are also used for weaving other costumes and attires. The tools are also designed for durability. In order to make the tools, men folk used to cut down the tree in the particular time of year i.e. before the windy season starts.

Believes and practices attached to weaving in the past

Among the Khezhakeno, women were skilled weavers. The villagers firmly believed that men should not touch the tools of women. It is known that men were the one who used to make all the tools which are required for weaving. But once the tools are handed over to the women then it becomes taboo for men to touch it. The villagers believed that if a man touches the tools of women then they will not be successful in hunting animals or take the enemy's head. Therefore if men are going out for war or for hunting purpose then they should not touch it by any means. Since during the past the sole duty of men folk was to provide for and protect the family and the village from the hands of the enemy, they observe these very strictly so that they will not face the consequences.

The weavers start the journey of weaving with the first step of producing the yarn. To produce the finest quality it requires lots of patience and skills starting with producing yarns. Starting with beating the fibres of the *khronhü* they have to do it well if not the colors of the yarn varies. The well beaten *khronhü* fibres become brighter. With warping also the weaver had to make sure that the sticks are plugged firmly to the ground or board and the yarns which goes around the sticks are pulled uniformly that is, it should not be too tight or loose. If the weavers do not check this then, it will start to slant, so to avoid this problem the expert weavers make sure that warping is done with proper care. After this once they start weaving, they want to finish it as quickly as possible so the weavers do not get up from their seats but continue to weave the shawl and so food and drinks had to be brought to them. As expert weavers they know that if they moved out from their seats often then the finished products will not be to their satisfaction. The finished product of the weavers differed from weaver to weaver where some weavers' work outshines their counterparts.

Conclusion

Khroora/Rülashe was woven every year before the harvesting season and has always brought the community together, but this valuable practice has ceased to exist among the khezhakeno with the passage of time. And the reason for the decay of this age-old practice is many. The main reason is the readymade raw material which is easily available in the market, where the villagers do not need to toil and work so hard. Though weaving is extensively continuing among the Khezhakeno people the process of indigenous production has

stopped. In the present age, everything they need is available in the market. They have basket of every size to carry the paddy as well as blankets and shawls which are available in abundance in the market.

Women through weaving were able to clothe their families. Over the years it has taken another role i.e. earning. With the easy accessibility of all the materials today, the villagers have completely stopped weaving *Khrora/Rülashe*. This unique indigenous practice has discontinued and the present generation is slowly forgetting about it where their existence will be unheard of. That is how we are losing our history and story, so it is the need of the hour that we document it. Because it is indeed our duty to preserve the legacy left behind by our ancestors in the form of this beautiful and significant shawl. So that people will have a deeper understanding of one's own tradition and culture, and will perceive one's culture with a renewed sense of respect and pride.

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