



# TRADITIONAL WEAVES AND EMPOWERMENT OF NAGA WOMEN: CHANGE AND ENDURING CONTINUITY OF ANGAMI WEAVERS OF MIMA VILLAGE

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**Abstract:** Nagas are strikingly known for their colorful traditional attires and costumes which is one of the core identity markers. With the progress of time, technology has revolutionized the weaving industry which has improved and accelerated the production process. The paper intends to show the significance and demand for traditional handwoven cloth and how it remains relevant in society despite of the modern development. Focusing on the Angami Naga village of Mima, the work gives insight into how women weavers still preserve the age-old traditional implements and techniques of weaving. The paper also made an assessment on how it proved to be a sustainable activity and a means of livelihood impacting toward women's empowerment today.

**Index Terms:** Traditional handloom, dye, gender, taboo, sustainability, empowerment.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mima village is nestled at the foothill of Mount Japfü in the Southern Angami area of Kohima district, Nagaland. The village is popularly known for the practice of underground bee-keeping method and is, therefore, called the "Honey Village." Weaving is another prospect emerging as an area of interest among the elders and the youth. Weaving serves as a symbol of self-reliance and expression of the rich cultural values, and thus, it holds a significant place in the lives of the people. The practice and knowledge of weaving have been passed on from generation to generation, and it serves as a way of preserving one's culture and identity. The traditional Angami society was deeply religious, and therefore, each woven cloth embodies diverse meanings attached to the cultural beliefs and ideals of the society. In a tribal village such as Mima, which has been separated from the other parts of civilization, the practice of weaving has been fulfilling one of the most basic needs of humans, which is clothing. The use of handwoven cloth is a tradition and a way of life that reflects the rich culture of the Angamis. One of the main appeals of the traditional woven cloth of the Angamis is its unique blending of colors in rows and columns and the careful attention given to the smallest detail in each piece.

In the traditional Angami society, there is a sharp distinction between gender roles. The hierarchical arrangement in the family placed women in a subordinate position to menfolk. Women were, therefore, assigned the role of taking charge of all domestic and agricultural activities and other vocational activities, such as weaving, which were considered less important to the family's male members. Weaving is an activity that is solely performed by womenfolk in Angami culture. This role may have been entrusted upon women

due to the societal beliefs and norms where women have been attributed with the characteristics of a nurturing and caring entity who cater to the needs of the family members. From childhood, women were taught to serve and look after the needs of their family members. As such, women are taught how to weave at a very young age to get trained and acquainted with the strokes and designs. In olden times, when the market of Western clothes was not easily accessible in rural areas, women took upon themselves the responsibility of providing woven clothes to meet the needs of their family members. Women maintain a strong sense of pride that they can provide woven clothes to their family members and extended relatives.

Weaving is generally defined as making fabric by crossing threads horizontally and vertically using a loom. Beautiful woven motifs, traditional production processes, and philosophical meanings in each woven cloth have become distinguishing features sought by buyers, who use them for fashion collections and investments (Naro, Antonius Maria K., Yunarti, Herlina, Mayaputri, Velmi, 2022). The weaving process demands enormous time investment and skills as it goes through different stages of thread preparation, warping, designing, and stitching. Each stage needs to be carefully tackled and completed to get good results. The weaving process has undergone a significant change and development by introducing simple tools to aid the production. However, the traditional method still has a substantial impact on weaving. The women weavers of Mima village still produce woven cloth using the conventional method.

## **1.1 A comparative analysis between khadi and the traditional handwoven cloth of the Angamis**

Khadi, a cotton hand-spun cloth, gained momentum with the support of Mahatma Gandhi during the Indians' freedom struggle. This age-old tradition of weaving cloth using a spinning wheel called the charkha has been practiced for centuries and symbolizes self-sufficiency. The manufacturing process of khadi and the traditional cloth weaving method of the Angamis are quite similar, wherein both processes use locally produced textiles and fabrics. Most activities, such as ginning, carding, spinning, warping, and weaving, are carried out in the production process of both khadi and the handwoven Angami cloth.

In olden times, the Angamis used the traditional handwoven woven cloth on a daily basis. The handwoven cloth was the only clothing type available for all occasions and seasons. People had no knowledge of Western clothes before they came into contact with the outside world. As time progressed, the different regions of the world were brought into contact with each other through the process of globalization, and this forced rural areas to connect with different cultures. The communication network with the outside world has posed several threats to the rural sector, both politically and economically. The availability of factory-manufactured clothes took over the handwoven products. This led to a decrease in demand for handwoven clothes. Similarly, before the arrival of foreign goods in India, khadi served as a symbol of indigenous pride while supporting the local economy. However, the import of British goods into India threatened the significance of the khadi cloth. Under the threat of losing importance and the overshadowing of such cultural heritage and pride due to foreign cultural influence, the traditional practices were revived with the aim to promote

Just as the khadi industry was used as a weapon to reinstate the cultural and indigenous heritage against foreign goods, the traditional weaving method of the Angamis is now being promoted to counter the threat posed by the fashion industry of foreign countries. It is with the aim of bringing back the original prestige and pride of the rich culture it had centuries ago.

### **2.1 Method of Traditional Cloth weaving of the Angamis**

The Angamis were known to have led a sustainable and self-sufficient lifestyle. Every family has the knowledge to provide for their daily needs, such as food, housing, and clothing. The traditional hand-weaving method has been an integral aspect of the culture of the Angami Nagas. In the olden days, due to the non-availability of modern industrial-produced yarns, weavers had to spin cotton and prepare the thread using traditional wooden and bamboo tools. Cotton crops are grown locally for personal use. In preparing the thread, cotton is picked and collected and slowly and carefully rolled into a single thread using a small wooden stick

to wrap it. A weaver generally takes five days minimum to prepare the thread. Natural dyes made from the bark of trees, roots, fruits, and leaves are applied to the thread. Crushed gooseberries are steeped in water and left for atleast five days. To get a dark greyish/black color, the cotton thread would be soaked in this water. Additionally, the bark of a tree known locally known as *Seiütha* (local name) is extracted and cooked for a few hours. Cotton thread is immersed in this water for a few hours, turning the thread black. The use of naturally extracted dyes is more environmentally friendly. The duration of preparing the cotton into a thread depends on the time spent by the weaver. When the thread is ready, it is warped between two sticks placed at a desirable distance from one end to the other in a vertical pattern until the desired size is achieved. The back strap loom is the method used to weave the cloth. This weaving method uses sticks, rope, and a strap tied around the weaver's waist, enabling the weaver to control the tension on the warp by leaning backward or forward. In this method, the weavers can also move and carry the loom to any space, allowing them to work indoors and outdoors. Designs and patterns can be incorporated into the fabric as it is woven. The traditional shawls and mekhela generally consist of four sides, which are to be woven separately. It is then stitched together manually at the same length, followed by the tying of the unwoven threads at the rear ends, which adds to the beauty of the cloth.

In the present age, the spinning of thread is done more effectively and at a faster pace with the use of simple machines. There is also the innovative introduction of a loom that does not require the strap to be tied around the waist of the weaver but is tied to the loom itself. This is stated to relieve the weavers, unlike the backstrap loom method. Vakranuo Tapa (18-10-2023, 03:06 PM, personal communication) a 72-year-old woman who is actively weaving expressed that this new loom enables her to weave continuously as it demands less physical strength to hold the loom. It is noted that industrial-produced yarns are easier to work with and more durable, enabling the weavers to accelerate the weaving process.

## 2.2 Types of Trees, Creepers, Fruits used for Dyeing the Thread



Tree

Bark

Fig. 1. *Seiütha* (Local name), Scientific name – *Archidendron monadelphum*

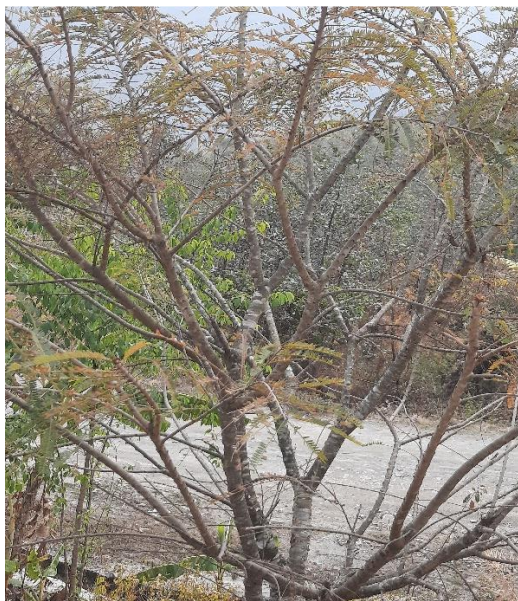


Creeper



Roots

Fig. 2. *Khuiimhelü* (Local name), genus – *Rubia*, Species- *Rubia Sikkimensis* Kurz



Tree



Fruit

Fig. 3. Gooseberry, Scientific name: *Phyllanthus emblica*

### 2.3 Traditional Weaving Implements and Tools:



Fig. 1. *Jüdo/Jüba*



Fig. 2. *Jükrie*



Fig. 3. *Jübo*



Fig. 4. *Chiepfü*



Fig. 5. *Jübe*



Fig. 6. *Jürü/ Jünyü*



Fig. 7. Traditional method of spinning yarn



Fig. 8. Simple Machine for spinning yarn



Fig. 9. Warping of thread

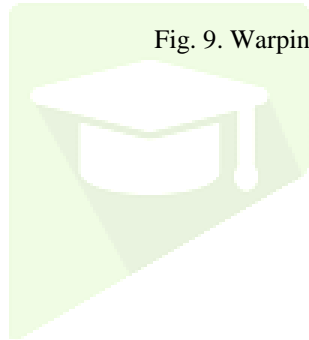
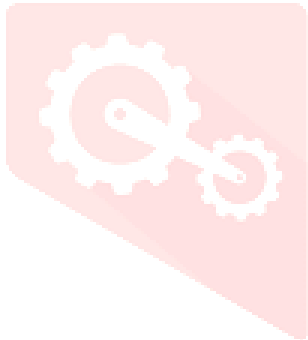




Fig. 10. Backstrap Loom



Fig. 11. Weave attached to the Loom

### 3.1 Taboo

In Angami society, there is a strong reverence for supernatural influences and beliefs in almost all activities, whether in agriculture, domestic, or other vocational fields. There is a deep sensation of fear in invoking evil luck towards one's destiny. Womenfolk are expected to carefully examine and follow the right course of action in all activities. The Angami society being highly patriarchal has placed women in a subordinate position to men. As such women were assigned with the responsibility of strictly observing certain taboos while weaving. Most of these taboos are observed for the benefit of the male members in the family and the village community.

- i) It is forbidden to feed or nurse a child while sitting on the weaver's seat.
- ii) The food consumed by the weaver whilst sitting on the weaver's seat should not be served to the male members.
- iii) A weave not completed before the *Sekrenyi* festival should not be kept inside the village boundary. The unfinished looms must be kept outside the village gate till the rituals of the festival are completed.
- iv) Weaving is not allowed on the day of *Kene* (wrestling).

### 3.2 The impact of industrially produced yarn on weaving:

The impact of globalization is visibly felt in the weaving industry, even in rural areas. Modern trade and commerce networks have changed the production and consumption patterns of woven clothes. Markets are flooded with textiles of different textures, superior quality, and colors, posing a direct threat to the locally produced textiles. Recently, weavers have had the option to choose the type of yarn to be used based on their

preferences due to the availability of industrial-produced yarn. The most commonly used types of thread are polyester, thylane, two-ply, and four-ply. There is a higher demand for products made of polyester as it is considered to have better results. The product's pricing depends on the quality, fabric used, complexity of the designs, and patterns on the cloth. There is a huge selection of colors to enhance the aesthetic aspect of the cloth. The shift from manually prepared yarn to factory-produced yarn has also changed and affected the production pace of woven clothes. The duration for the preparation of thread is minimal since weavers have the opportunity to get access to industrial textiles. The time invested in the preparation of yarn is minimized, enabling the weavers to complete the production at a faster pace.

The weavers of Mima village continue to adopt the traditional handweaving method as it produces the best quality with smooth weft and fetches a higher price than the factory-produced clothes. It is mentioned that a suit of shawl and mekhela can be woven within 10-13 days. However, the pace of production of cloth can be affected and manipulated for those weavers who have other social obligations, particularly those within their household.

### 3.3 Weaving as a source of livelihood:

Angami women uphold a great sense of self-respect in all facets of their lives, including job, household duties, involvement in the community, and personal bearing. It is a source of pride and an asset for women to have knowledge of the art of weaving. The practice and knowledge of weaving have been passed on from generation to generation. Weaving is emerging as an activity that provides entrepreneurial opportunities for women in rural areas. It also generates employment in rural sectors and manifests the economic development of rural areas. Women not only enjoy the freedom to express their artistry in weaving, but they also view it as an opportunity to earn and contribute to the household economy. Although handwoven clothes are not worn on a daily basis in modern times, the demand for these products continues to rise. In contrast to the olden times, weavers now earn and derive steady income by selling and marketing their handwoven clothes. Thus, it has become a sustainable activity, particularly in rural areas such as Mima village.

Weaving has become the professional career for about 20 women weavers of Mima Village. The weavers of Mima Village have been supplying handwoven cloth to the neighboring villages throughout the year without having commitments in other income-generating activities. Young women who have secured good education have shown interest in weaving as a source of earning as the demand is increasing. The age of women weavers' ranges from 20-72 years. The young weavers who are more energetic can weave the cloth within short durations of time, thereby enabling them to earn better. The age-old tradition and practice allow the weavers to utilize their skills to make a living.

Vizokhole (18/10/2023, 12:34 PM, personal communication) states that women not only produce the goods, but also enjoy authority in the management of their business by marketing, negotiating, and pricing the goods. The income generated through weaving is relatively impacted by the time invested to finish the product. The prices of products vary based on the size and the type of shawls.

### 3.4 Price variation of male shawls:

Table 1: Price of different types of male shawls

Sl.No	Type of shawl	Type of wool	Price
1.	<i>Lopa</i>	Polyester	8000
2.	<i>Lopa</i>	Thylane	6000
3.	<i>Lopa</i>	Two-ply	4500
4.	<i>Lohe</i>	Polyester	6000
5.	<i>Lohe</i>	Thylane	5000
6.	<i>Lohe</i>	Two-ply	4500
7.	<i>Phfese</i>	Polyester	17000



### 3.5 Price Variation of female shawls

Table 2. Price Variation of female shawls

Sl.No.	Type of shawl	Type of wool	Prices
1.	<i>Lopa</i>	Polyester	6500
2.	<i>Lopa</i>	Thylane	5000
3.	<i>Lopa</i>	Two-ply	4000
4.	<i>Lohe</i>	Polyester	5000
5.	<i>Lohe</i>	Thylane	4000
6.	<i>Lohe</i>	Two-ply	3500
7.	<i>Pfhemhou</i>	Polyester	6500
8.	<i>Pfhemhou</i>	Thylane	5000
9.	<i>Pfhemhou</i>	Two-ply	4000

Table 3: Price variation of two-piece set female cloth

Sl.No.	Type of shawl	Type of wool	Prices
1.	<i>Pfhemhou</i> suit	Polyester	14000
2.	<i>Pfhemhou</i> suit	Thylane	12000
3.	<i>Pfhemhou</i> suit	Two-ply	11000
4.	<i>Lohe</i> suit	Polyester	9500
5.	<i>Lohe</i> suit	Thylane	8500
6.	<i>Lohe</i> suit	Two-ply	7500

The prices mentioned in the table represent the selling price in retail. The wholesale price may vary depending on the negotiations between the weaver and the dealer. Besides the cited articles and types of shawls and mekkelas, various items are produced through weaving. For example, *Teha*, *Bipra*, *Biso*, *Chiepha*, etc, are some traditional attires that are small in size but involve many skills to weave. A weaver can earn around INR 30000/- monthly. This suggests that weavers have the opportunity to make a steady income and become financially independent.

#### 4.1 Conclusion

Today, the traditional woven cloth continues to symbolize the rich heritage of the Angamis. It is also emerging as fashionable pieces designed and incorporated with modern ideas. The preservation of the traditional weaving method gives an opportunity for the younger generation to support sustainable trade practices through their fashion choices. The vibrant handwoven fabric is a representation of the rich cultural legacy that is showcased through the imaginative patterns. Women have been showing increased interest in using handwoven products such as traditional shawls and mekhela. Promoting our culture and tradition immensely facilitates the demand for these products. This study suggests that the weaving industry benefits the local economy by reducing poverty and raising living standards in rural areas. As such, the weaving industry needs to be developed and supported by providing financial loans/assistance for weavers to purchase their materials. It is observed that product quality, design, and colors positively impact the purchase of handwoven cloth. Training on skills and creative designs can also help to expand the market and demand for handwoven cloth among young consumers. In this regard, the government can create schemes to assist and provide training on vocational skills that can improve the economy.

Since the weaving process involves a lot of concentration and good health, many women have expressed that their income is affected when they cannot work due to health complications. Another factor that hampers the weavers' ability is the obligation that arises within their household. Women have permanently been assigned the household chores such as cooking, carrying water, cleaning, washing, etc. Therefore, it can

be understood that productive ability is primarily affected by those weavers with children of their own. These issues and problems can be checked with the efforts of the government or the NGOs by arranging collective marketing and trading activities that would enable the weavers to get incentives over a period of time. This would also enable the weavers to maintain a production plan and generate and distribute orders.

The considerable variation in prices between the machine woven cloth and the handloom also threatens the traditional weaving entrepreneurs as they cannot compete with the pace of production. As such, the government can create and set up markets for traditional weavers, promoting the products through exhibitions and connecting the local weavers with international buyers.

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### Personal Interviews:

1. Vakranuo Tapa, Female, 72 years, Mima Village, 18/10/2023, 03:06 PM
2. Tunuo Tapa, Female, 66 yers, Mima Village, 17/02/2024, 08:30 AM
3. Vizokhole Keyie, Female, 47 Years, Mima Village,18/10/2023, 12:34 PM
4. Kuolemenuo Lese, Female, 25 yers, Mima Village, 20/10/2023, 08:41 AM
5. Kruvinuo Ngukha, Female, 58 yers, Mima Village, 16/10/2023, 09:18 AM
6. Khrievozonuo Tapa, Female, 46 yers, Mima Village, 17/02/2024, 08:15 AM