



DRESS AND ORNAMENTS AS CATALYSTS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: AN AO-NAGA PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT This paper attempts to study the role of dress and ornaments as a catalyst of social positioning among the Ao Nagas. Dress and ornaments are obvious medium through which social categorizations and distinctions can be made, and is a valuable way to understand the purposeful communicative positioning in relation to historical concepts. In fact, the basic social context inherent in most studies of clothing and culture is historical, a perspective in which interpretation is based on the examination of change and continuity in time and space. Ao-Nagas dress and ornaments in particular also share such cohesive representation of social division on account of the nature and circumstances upon which their observations are intricately imbedded in the society. Artefacts are concrete items that are created by humans. We can study through artefacts (dress and ornaments) the belief system – the values, ideas, and assumptions – of a particular community or society.

KEYWORDS : Dress and Ornaments, Social Stratification, Ao Naga, Social Identity

INTRODUCTION

Dress and ornamentation are expression of a culture, and at the same time a medium and a creation and reinforcement of current cultural values. They define individuals as members of a group; this is shown clearly by the example of the Nagas, whose abstract cultural values are visibly rendered in the shawls and ornaments that the Naga wears. Dress also marks different factions within a society; a reading of the patterns, motifs, and colours reveal the communal and village identity of the maker and wearer. It is also a marker of the primitive fashion which has been accurately recorded by Milada Ganguli, "In the street, you may see groups of jolly people dressed in colourful attires as if they were going to attend a festival. After a few days' stay, however, you will discover that members of this tribe (Ao-Naga), particularly women, loved to dress up and decorate themselves even when going out on ordinary days."

MAJOR METHODS OF CATEGORIZATION:

1. The first major category of historical study is one in which artefacts, and especially jewellery, are used to reconstruct the cultures of the past, such as that of ancient Egypt or pre-Columbian America.
2. A second common approach is to use a vertical perspective, noting change over time, arranging costumes sequentially, and focusing on origin and evolution, the goal being to find relevant explanations and meanings in a historical sequence of creations.
3. A third method is based on a horizontal perspective that locates variety in artefacts within a historical period, expanding the examination, not back in time, but rather outward spatially into society; the aim is to locate explanations within the current social context.

OTHER METHODS

Additional historical methods employed to study dress and ornamentation are centred on the contemporary. One approach is to attempt to understand some present-day item by tracing its historical development, a method employed by Valerie Steele in her engaging book on the corset. Another way in which scholars use the past to contextualize the present is found in studies of the revival of dress and ornamentation that had been abandoned, usually under colonial rule, such as Alfred Gell's study of the resurgence of tattoo traditions in Polynesia.

One of the main functions fulfilled by dress is to mark the multiple identities of individuals, and therefore, to position them within their social networks. Because of the conspicuous nature of clothing and ornamentation as a device of social communication, many works by anthropologists and folklorists have contributed to our understanding of society and how its structure and dynamic relate to bodily adornment, along with other collective forms of expression, such as mythology.

Petr Bogatyrev's landmark study of the costumes of Moravian Slovakia, published in 1937, beautifully shows how social messages - indexing wealth, age, marital status, social structure, outside influences, aesthetics, and magic — function simultaneously, layered one on top of another, in displays of dress and adornment.

DRESS AS A SOCIAL IDENTITY MARKER

Dress acts as a social identity marker within the society, while also creating a cohesive social unit in opposition to neighbouring groups. For instance, among the Ao-Naga women, dress differentiates the position and status of one woman from another. The Ao-Naga women of each clan have a skirts (*Süpeti*), each with its distinctive pattern. The colours are different or the strips are different for the each clan, so that at any time it is possible to tell to what clan a woman belongs. The daughter of a man who has done mithun sacrifice wears a different pattern on her skirt than that of the daughter of a poor man. The wife of the rich man is more heavily ornamented than a poor man's wife. Another interesting fact is that, a rich man's daughter does not lose the right to wear the particular pattern, even when she is married to a poor man. The peculiar patterns are indicative of the wealth and position and their distinction. These practises are definitely fixed and custom enjoins that they should be strictly adhered to.

The Ao-Naga men were also identified in the society with respect to the type of dress and clothes they wear. Generally, men were categorised as common or poor man, rich or wealthy man, and warriors or valour man. For instance, the most common shawl is the plain blue made of coarse cloth which is used by the poorer people, but the rich people used it while doing their ordinary work. The rich men in addition had finer clothes ornamented with rich designs using dog's hair dyed red and colourful threads.

The shawl of Ao-Naga men proclaims a man's wealth and ability. Shawls like *Rongsusü*, *Aosü*, and *Tapensasü* were most difficult to earn for it can be worn only by those men who have done mithun sacrifice for two or three generations.

The men were also identified distinctively as warriors or man of valour by the type of shawls they wore during special occasions and festivals. *Ayaksü*, *Kizesü*, and *Angnensü* were shawls worn by the men who have taken enemy heads, or performed act of valour. Shawl like *Züporisü* can be worn by a man who has burnt the whole or a part of an enemy village. But unlike any other shawls, this particular shawl cannot be bought from the village elders.

Ornaments As An Agent Of Social And Ethnic Positioning

Both men and women of the Ao-Naga loved ornaments. Ornaments play an important role in differentiating the social position of a person in the society. Like some dresses, some ornaments were restricted to some category of people who were distinguished from the common man.

Ornaments were worn by such men who have done mithun sacrifice (wealthy man) and completed the full series of feast of merits. Ornaments such as *Metilong* (earring worn by men), *Kongshiri*, *Lakup-Melung*, *Shipu* (necklace of men), *Khap* (cowrie gauntlet), *Tsüngta* and *Merang Tsüngta* (leggings) were worn by men of wealth. There were certain ornaments which can only be worn by gallantry achievements and display of valour by warriors. Boar tusk earring, *Shim Korang* and *Tamen Korang* (headgears), *Shukuyi* (baldric), *Sokupong* (conical basket ornamented with a fringe of red goat's hair), *Tsüngtsüing* (ringing bell) were ornamental distinctions that can be

worn only by warriors. The common man in general had some few ornaments that he is eligible to wear such as *Sujak* and *Angtong Langtem* (loin cloth).

Ornaments holds a special place among Ao-Naga Women. They were not just worn to add beauty but were considered as essential to the happiness and well-being of the wearer. Ornaments such as *Yongmen Semyi* (brass chain), hornbill feather on head, *Yiptongwangkam* (necklace with brownish beads) can be worn only by the wives and women of rich men. However, ornaments such as *Tongpang* (ear ornament), *Mesemyok*, *Lakapmichi*, *Mechongchangshi* (necklace) can be worn by common or ordinary women whose father or husband can buy them for her or who has inherited or bought them herself.

CONCLUSION

Ornaments and dresses are tangible sources to identify, communicate, remind and organise our actions. They guide our attention, express and individualise, and help generate an experience and beautify as well as represent the past society. The artefacts (dress and ornaments) are essential primary sources to interpret the past history. Material based on artefacts permits a more concrete, and less abstract understanding of everyday life. Objects are a more tangible link to the past and can play multiple purpose. Artefacts are expression of a culture, and at the same time, a medium in the creation and reinforcement of cultural values.

Mac Fleming, in viewing and looking at the cultural values reflected by a given artefact, proposed to include the following elements: i). Craftmanship, ii). Raw materials, origin and destination, iii). Technology of that era, iv). Wealth of the users, v). customs and social patterns, vi). Images reflecting popularity of the object, and vii). Form and functions.

The spectacular pomp and gaiety brought upon the Naga society by the intricate attires and ornaments not only created the blatant social stratification in the society, but also leaves behind an obnoxious truth. I would like to draw the curtain down with the words of JP Mills, "In the old days a poor man who was fortunate enough to take a head would often sell it and all his rights in it to a rich man, arguing, very truly, that glory does not fill the stomach."

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