

## **Ehthso and Hiam: Traditional Fiber Works of the Khamniungan Nagas of Nagaland, India**

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### **Abstract**

In society, the past, present, and future are bound together. Thereby, the identity is carried down through the generations, and this relationship includes indigenous technology. Environment and culture are intertwined in humans; just as culture influences the environment, so does environment influence culture. This article explores such a case among the Khamniungan Nagas, where they exploit locally available plants for fabric making. The processing of the fabric from plants to finished products is described. Walking three hours through rocky terrain to reach the fabric work's harvesting site is one of the difficulties in maintaining the fabric work as a living practice, a treasured cultural resource. The initiative undertaken by a group called Ehlon-Niu to preserve and assure the continuity of the tradition and to perpetuate it despite the challenges and hardship incurred by such activities is reflected as well. The article also explores the challenges posed by the availability of cheaper fabric in the market upon the survival of the indigenous knowledge of fabric making as a living culture.

**Keywords:** Khamniungan, *Ehlon-Niu*, Fibre, Tradition, Plants

### **Introduction:**

In the northeastern part of India lies the state of Nagaland, a region rich in cultural diversity and ethnic heritage. The state has 17 major Naga tribes, among which Khamniungan is one. With their settlements spanning across the easternmost border of Nagaland, Khamniungans share their boundaries with Myanmar in the east, Chang in the west, Konyak in the north, and Yimkhiung and Tikhir in the south.

The term "Khamniungan" is a compound word consisting of various lexicons, 'Kham' meaning water 'Niu' meaning mighty or great and 'Ngan' meaning Source. Thus, Khamniungan

means 'Source of Great Water'. The Khamniungan language, a Tibeto-Burman tongue, exhibits tonal variations from village to village. Yet, despite these differences, the Khamniungans understand each other's tones and words with ease. Their settlements, comprising nearly 200 villages are scattered across both Indian and Myanmar territories. The Khamniungan society is structured around the fundamental units of family, clan, and village, fostering an egalitarian ethos. Sardeshpande (2017), mentions that there is a fair division of duties among the clans in socio-economic and political activities.<sup>1</sup> The origin and development of clans into sub-clans or minor clans is traced to Khamngan (from where the word

‘Khamniungan’ has its derivation), a claimed place of origin (Pillai 2001, 87).<sup>2</sup>

Through generations, the Khamniungans have finely tuned their way of life to coexist harmoniously with nature. Their profound understanding of the environment is reflected in their clothing, tools, diet, and overall lifestyle. Agriculture has been the major source of economy for the Khamniungans. Jhum cultivation particularly was practised since its inception. Lands were divided into family lands, clan lands, and village lands. Apart from agriculture, blacksmith was an important occupation of Wui, a Khamniungan village with exceptional workmanship. The Khamniungan crafts in the production of different materials such as conical hats, leggings, spears and daos (Mills 1926, 55),<sup>3</sup> additionally bows and poisoned arrows (Hutton 1968, 37) were popular among the other Naga tribes.<sup>4</sup> Julian Jacobs (1990) throws information on the procurement of pieces of iron, tin or sheet brass from Plain tea estates.<sup>5</sup> The Konyaks and Kalyo-Kengyus, as he mentions, were held to be masters in the production of iron tools. In regards to trade, Jacobs observed that the Kalyo-Kengyus in the east were the producers of basic conical red-and-gold cane hats which were traded to the Aos, Konyaks, Phoms, Changs and other Naga tribes. However, in the earlier writings of different anthropologists and historians, the works and responsibilities borne by the Khamniungan women have not been properly recorded. This article is an attempt to throw light on the significance of one of the roles of the Khamniungan women. It attempts to unfold the meticulous traditional extraction and treatment of plant fibres.

### **Methodology :**

In acquiring the information, a qualitative

method of research was followed. The collection of data was done following the given methodology:

- (a) The primary source of collection of information was based on the in-depth method of oral interviews and personal observation of the activities performed.
- (b) The Treatment Process of the fibre was observed, on display by the Ehlon-Niu during the Naturally Nagaland and Noklak Handicrafts Festival at Noklak on 9<sup>th</sup> Feb 2022.
- (c) 14 members of Ehlon-Niu, aged from 19 to 78 years were interviewed on 13<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2022 at Choklangan Village.
- (d) Semi-readied fibre and products were used for demonstration during the interview.

### **Choklangan:**

Choklangan is a Khamniungan village situated towards the East of Noklak town at a distance of 47 Km. Choklangan village is rich with different varieties of bamboo and men in this village are artistic in basketry making and different kinds of bamboo works. The stinging nettle plants are found in the wild forest of Choklangan. Ahlam Ki and Indoh, approximately 7 Km away from the village are places where these plants are found. The harvesters have to take a tiring walk of 2-3 hours to reach the site. Situated on the foot of Khelia Keng (Mt. Khelia), Choklangan forests are home to different kinds of flora and fauna.<sup>6</sup> The plants of Hiam, Stinging Nettle (*Urtica Dioica*) and Ehthso, Orange Wild Rhea (*Debregeasia Longifolia*), are some of the indigenous species found in these areas.

### **Ehlon-Niu:**

Women from the Choklangan village engaged in individual fibre craftsmanship and

gained popularity among the Khamniungans. The demand for their products surged, attracting attention from the different parts of Khamniungan areas. Invitations to participate and to showcase their artistic works in various programmes followed suit. The considerable sales revenue also benefited the artisans and helped them realise that collaboration could amplify their impact and provide a more stable foundation for their craft. This led to the establishment of *Ehlon-Niu* on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2010 at Choklangan. *Ehlon-Niu* is a group of women who specialize in the art of traditional weaving of Orange Wild Rhea and Stinging Nettle fibres. The word *Ehlon-Niu* is derived from three Khamniungan words, 'Eh' meaning fibre, 'Lon' meaning thread and 'Niu' denoting woman. Thus, they are a group of women who thread fibres and work them out into different products. Presently, there are 25 members in the group.

### **Process of Harvesting:**

Orange Wild Rhea and Stinging Nettle are harvested during September, October and November, before the onset of winter and cold season. During these months the skin of the plants is soft and flexible enough to be peeled easily. After these months, the onset of cold climatic conditions and snow begins to fall, making the plants and their bark rigid. It breaks easily in the nodes making the process of peeling arduous while harvesting.

The process of harvesting fibre commences by designating a specific day and preparing the necessary materials. The bamboo scrapes which are used for the removal of the outer skin of the plants are sourced either from individual households or from the morung.<sup>7</sup> As the men or husbands engage in the task of working on the bamboo, the women gather these scrapes. The extraction of the barks demands a significant amount of laborious effort

and unwavering dedication. The journey to the forest, spanning a distance of 7 kilometres or even more, marks the next phase. When the location isn't too distant, the women venture in pairs or small groups of 2-3 individuals. On occasions where the distance of the site is far, it is commonly observed that menfolk accompany the women.

The process of harvesting the plant involves cutting it at the stem's base using a dao. Employing bamboo scrapes, the task of removing leaves and spikes ensues, with a stripping motion from the stem's bottom to top. After the thorough cleaning of the plant, a longitudinal division is made at its centre, leading to the separation of the bark from the stem. This is accomplished by meticulously peeling the bark in both directions, rendering it free from the stalk. The separated bark is then suspended around the neck of the collector for convenient transportation. Once a sufficient quantity of approximately 25-30 plant barks have been accumulated, they are systematically rolled and stored in a designated basket. The extent of fibre harvested is contingent upon the availability of suitable plants and the proficiency exhibited by the individual responsible for harvesting. This interplay between the abundance of the plants and the skilled harvester collectively dictates the quantity of fibre acquired. A skilled person on average manages to collect a basketful while an average person may get half a basket or a little more in a day. There are certain difficulties involved in the process of harvesting stinging nettle plants. Congruous to its namesake, the leaves and the spikes of the tree usually sting during the process of peeling the bark. Besides such discomfort of stinging sensation from the plants, insect bites and leeches add to the stress and discomfort of fibre harvesting.

The process of extracting Orange Wild Rhea fibre differs from that of Stinging Nettle. Orange Wild Rhea trees are found near the rivers or in the old field which has been cultivated several years ago and left for furrowing. The trees have multiple branches from whereby a bark is extracted. Using a hook or a dao, the harvesters cut or pull the branches down. The extraction is done with the same process as the stinging nettle plant. While the stinging nettle plants are found in a concentrated area(s), orange wild rhea trees are found scattered and in different places.

### **Treatment of the Bark:**

Immediately after being brought home, the bark is dried. Either the sun or shade is used to dry it, and the fibre strands are cleaned of any debris, such as leaves or sticks, and then hung on a bamboo or tree pole. The drying process can take a few days to weeks, depending on the nature of the bark. Once the bark fibres have dried, they are gathered and stored securely to prevent breaking. The strands are then collected as needed and placed in a basket made for storage to be threaded later. The bark is covered with a specific type of damp clayey soil that is procured from a nearby community for covering the bark to let it soften and to keep it through the night. When the soil becomes too dry, it is taken out and replaced with fresh wet soil. The strand of softened bark is divided into individual cells. It is then divided based on the individual's taste for weaving in thin or thick material. After which, the edges of each cell are twisted against one another to form a long cell. In turn, this is folded up into a ball bun. The stone drop spindle is then loaded with the rolled thread. It is afterwards transformed into a hank (ehkhu) by being diagonally wound into an H-shaped winder. Depending on the texture of the fibre, it is cooked in water for 2 to 3 hours after being removed from the winder. The

required amount of ash is put into the cooking pot for the easy removal of the husk or the outer skin. The husk must then be rigorously checked for removal before cooking. In the event of a shortage or depletion throughout the operation, water is retrieved and filled to its appropriate scale. After it has been cooked sufficiently, it is transported to the river to be washed. Before the strand cools down, washing is performed by pounding it with the use of a wooden piece (Eh-opkin). The strand is then re-dampened in water containing maize after undergoing this procedure. For this, a number of ears of corn are ground up and added to water. To make the fibre softer and smoother, the hank of fibre is placed within it and left for around 15-20 minutes. After that, it is kept dry, which is done for a few hours or even days, depending on how damp or dry the hank is. In preparation for further processing, the dry fibre is given a gentle massage. The fibre hank is further placed on a skeiner or one's knees or legs and rolled into a ball when it is time to weave. This is spun into a wrap beam for the weft threads and used directly for the warp threads. Eh-lei (loincloth), phachiam (sash), nethso (skirt), neylon (simple shawl), neymok (blanket), bags, mufflers and waistcoats are among the items woven and made from these fibres.

### **Folk song:**

Women did the threading in their own homes with the convenience of one's time. Sometimes they gathered at a particular place or someone's house and threaded the fibre at night and sang a folk song as they worked. It is sung especially at night when they work in groups to avoid sleepiness and to relieve the boredom of a tedious job. This improved the efficiency of the work. The song signifies and tells about the fibres and the hard work employed in working on them. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

“Ahwem kongkong thso ni mosai,  
Paosisao lomthso sai-an ie  
Ehthso eh ta nungta jonshi nou  
Hiam eh ta nungta jonshi nou  
Eh lemle ku noi ni mosai  
Eh lemle oh ni mosai.”

Its English translation of the lyrics:

“Midnight bird, I haven’t slept yet,  
All other insects have gone to sleep,  
This is called Orange Rhea fibre  
This is called Stinging Nettle fibre  
I’m threading still awake  
I’m threading Oh I haven’t slept yet.”<sup>8</sup>

#### **Importance of preserving the traditional fibre works:**

The cultural heritage and identity of the community or region are carried by the Khamniungan Naga textile arts. They stand for the distinctive artistic expressions and handiwork of the populace. The meticulously designed and produced traditional fibre crafts display outstanding artistic talent. They are made with materials that are produced locally and sustainably, demonstrating generations-old skills. These fibres are important artistic works that add to the Khamniungan cultural heritage in addition to being useful objects. Traditional fibre crafts frequently need specialist expertise that has been handed down from one generation to the next. By preserving these methods, the priceless traditional knowledge and expertise are guaranteed, protected from loss, and can be passed on to future generations. Choklangan village’s principal source of revenue is still agriculture, but the selling of finished goods manufactured from their distinctive fibre crafts also

provides a sizable portion of the artisans’ income. Traditional fibre arts must be preserved to protect cultural heritage, advance sustainable practices, preserve traditional knowledge, and strengthen local communities. Beyond only being useful, clothing and textiles have a rich cultural, aesthetic, and economic history that benefits Khamniungan people.

#### **Conclusion:**

Since many centuries ago, it has been a common practice to weave using the fibre that was taken from these wild plants. Since *Ehlon-Niu* was founded, the process of extracting fibre and using it for various purposes has continued. The availability of ready-made fibres, wool, and textile materials as well as the emergence of commercial markets, however, have greatly reduced the production of Orange Wild Rhea and Stinging Nettle fibre. The labour-intensive, time-consuming procedure of fibre extraction and treatment has been surpassed by the preference for pre-made clothes and materials from the market. As a result, there has been a sharp decline in the synthesis of these fibres into useful products. Only a small number of things, including carry bags, mufflers, waistcoats, and shawls, are still made from finished goods made from these fibres. Instead of being incorporated into daily routines or standard apparel, these things are saved for certain occasions and used by a small number of people. Unfortunately, the weaving of traditional clothing like eh-lei (loincloth), phachiam (sash), and nethso (skirt) has been stopped.

Although traditional weaving is becoming less prevalent in daily life, there is still a noticeable demand for it in modern marketplaces, which is backed up by its functional importance. Both Khamniungans and members of other ethnic

groups who respect these materials continue to buy and use products created from them, realising the value of both preserving the cultural legacy and satisfying practical demands for clothing and jewellery.

In the face of several obstacles, some actions and measures should be taken to advance the practice and maintain the tradition of textile works. In the regions where the fibre plants are found, logging and deforestation should be minimised and discouraged. On March 9, 2020, the Nagaland government designated a few acres

of Choklangan forest as a Biodiversity Peace Corridor. Such an effort will result in preserving the animals and plants including stinging nettle and orange wild rhea. It is also important to impart to girls the knowledge and skills necessary to extract, process, and weave these fibres. Another method of conserving the cultural tradition of stinging nettle and orange wild rhea fibre extraction is through video documentation. The preservation of these practices will be more successful if multidisciplinary research is used and these practices are examined from various perspectives.

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Sardeshpande, S.C. (1987) 2017. *The Patkoi Nagas*. Reprint. New Delhi: Daya Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup>Pillai, S.K., (2001). *The Water People: A Khamniungan Landscape*. In R.N.Sen And Ashish Benarjee (Ed.). *The Human Landscape*. (pp. 85-108). New Delhi: Orient Longman.

<sup>3</sup>Mills, J.P. (1926) 2003. *The Ao Nagas*. Reprint. Kohima: Directorate of Art and Culture Government of Nagaland.

<sup>4</sup>Hutton, J.H. (1968). *The Angami Nagas*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup>Jacobs, Julian. (1990). *Nagas: Society, Culture and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

<sup>6</sup>Khelia Keng is one of the highest mountains of Nagaland at an altitude of 3462 metres above sea level. This mountain also serves as a geographical boundary delineating the territories of India and Myanmar.

<sup>7</sup>When men cut and smooth the bamboo for basketry works, the removal of irregularities, rough spots or uneven textures from the stalks, cut into a desired length, is done by scraping. These scrapes are collected which is used during the extraction of plant bark.

<sup>8</sup>The term 'Midnight bird' is a metaphorical expression used to describe a bird that produces sounds at night hours.

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