
Textiles of the Meiteis: Some Observation on the Fabrics and Designs

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Abstract: *The Meiteis have a rich tradition; one of them is the variety of dresses they wear. The art of making traditional textiles still continues from the ancient times with some minor changes. The Meiteis have a close affinity with the surrounding environment, and some of those have been showcased in the form of designs on their textiles. Men and women wear variety of dresses on different occasions. During the monarchical times, rewards of shawls, shirts, dhotis with particular design was given to noblemen and brave soldiers for their contribution towards the safeguarding and development of the society.*

Keywords: Meiteis, Textiles, Mayek Naibi Phanek, Pumngou Phanek, Mangaani Chakkouba, Moirangphee Design, Khoi Akoibi Mayek

Introduction

Textiles play an important role in one's life as it protects the body from exposing it to extreme climates. The material refinement to get the texture, weaving pattern, designs added and colour applied makes it attractive and each addition makes it exclusive, expensive and reflects the wearer's status. In addition to it, decorations used in textiles changes according to the fashion and tradition. Identity of a community or an ethnic group is recognized from the traditional dress they wear. Textile weaving is an art with different types of designs and patterns. The notion of designs may have come to the mind of man by observing the surrounding environment and it signifies their belief, faith and social relevance. In course of time, designs on the dresses differ from community to community and a particular type of design becomes an identity of a community.

Manipur (lat. 23° 50' and 25° 30' N and long. 93° 10' and 94° 30' E) in the far Northeastern part of India has an area of 22,346 sq.km and is divided into nine districts. The state is known to be a bio diverse state with various flora and fauna. The diverse flora and fauna is seen printed as different designs on the dresses of the people of Manipur. There are three major ethnic groups in Manipur: the *Meiteis*, the *Nagas* and the *Kuki-Chins*. *Meiteis* constitute about 60% of the state's population (Barbina 2011).

The *Meiteis* use different varieties of textiles on specific occasions. Silk and cotton are the most preferred fabrics since ancient times. Some silk and cotton textiles belonging to around eleventh century AD are preserved by people of *Ngangkhalawai* and *Ningthoukhong*. A particular *Puya* (Meitei manuscript) *Ningthou Phi Shabane* (making of King's royal cloth) mentions about the use of silk textiles during the reign of Meitei King Meidingu Khuyoi Tompok in second century AD (Bahadur 1997). Some textiles and designs which were prevalent during monarchical times have either changed its usage or ceased to show its importance in recent times. Types of textiles made of course and fine fabrics and having innumerable designs are used by Meitei men and women. The fabric of these textiles varies depending upon the occasion or hierarchy.

Fabric Used

In Meitei society, any individual or family is free to weave cloths and it is not decided by the society. It is generally the women who weave textiles. Silk is produced in the state and is of two types: Muga silk and tasar silk but cotton is procured from outside the state. As mentioned earlier, silk and cotton remain the most preferable fabrics used by the *Meiteis* till today. The use of silk for weaving cloth is believed to have a long old tradition as evidenced from the narratives from folktales. One of the folktales is that once the Queen of Meidingu Khuyoi Tompok gave birth to a worm like creature. When the King got the news, he was stunned and asked his servants to take care of the worm but none of them were willing as they did not have any idea what to feed the worm. When the servants brought some leaves of a plant (probably mulberry leaves) to cover, the worm started eating the leaves. After that a servant offered to rear the worm. Silk threads were spun from the cocoon of the *Leima* (royal name for princess) and so silk came to be known as *Leima kabrang* (Bahadur 1997). The practice of weaving silk cloth is still practiced in the villages of *Leimaram* and *Khurkhul*. Cotton is also used as a raw material for weaving cloth. There is also a tradition during the *Lai Haraoba* (festival of the sylvan deities), where the *Maibeas* (priestess) perform a dance called *Paam yaanba*. The dance is movement of hands which depicts the cultivation of land, subsequent sowing of cotton seeds, plucking of cotton, ginning, carding, weaving cloth out of cotton and offering to God. However, cotton remained as the less preferable material than silk.

Women get opportunities for wearing dresses made of different fabrics on different occasions. On weddings, they wear *phanek* (traditional wraparound) made from cotton. *Phanek* made of silk is worn on the day of *Mangaani Chaakouba* (a luncheon at the bride's place on the fifth day after marriage). Married ladies generally wear *Phige Phanek* (*phanek* with stripes of black and white as dominant colours with embroidered border) and maidens wear muga *phanek* (*phanek* with *moirangphee* design on the border). The *moirangphee* design is a series of triangular pattern with a line on top and is similar to a temple design. The *innaphi* (shawl which is worn over the blouse) is also made of silk and cotton. During marriages, a shawl made of fine silk is worn over the blouse. Designs like the *moirangphee* or temple design and floral design are often stitched on the *innaphi* with fine silk threads.

Textiles of the Royal Family and Noblemen

Some of the textiles are specifically designed and woven for the important segment of the society. They are:

Ngathokpa Phee

Ngathokpa phee (Fig. 1) is a shirt used by the King of Manipur, Rajshri Bhagyachandra (AD 1759-62 and AD 1763-98). In Manipuri, it means shirt with the fish pattern. The shirt has a number of broad vertical lines with borders of a combination of red, yellow, green, white and black colour. In each row, there are a number of fishes facing downwards with red colour in the background. The sleeves have broad horizontal lines where the fishes are facing left and right. A band of white cloth is stitched at the waist.



Figure 1: Ngathokpa Phee and Details of Design (Courtesy: Bahadur 1977)

Wanphak Phurit

Wanphak Phurit (Fig. 2) is a type of jacket which was worn by the royal ladies and also given as rewards to women who excel in their fields like arts and crafts. The jacket has vertical stripes of red colour and small triangles of black and yellow colours in between the red lines. The design is called the *Lisa Mayek* (Bahadur 1997). The borders at the neck, arms and front openings of the jacket has the *khoh* or hook design which is found at the border of *mayek naibi phanek*. The embroidery is done with silk thread.

Luhong Phichil

The *Luhong Phichil* is a set of laces, one narrow whereas the other is broad. The narrow lace is stitched at the border of the length and the broad lace is stitched at the broad border. The narrow lace has a series of black colour *yensin* (a local grass) design, with white colour in the background. The broad lace has an oval shaped *khoh* or hook design. These laces are used by the royal bridegroom.



Figure 2: Wanphak Phurit and Details of Design (Courtesy: Bahadur 1977)

Ningthouphee

Ningthouphee is given as a reward by the king to warriors. *Ningthouphee* is of two types: one is sleeveless jacket which is called the *Ningthouphee Saikakpa* and another is long coat which is called *Ningthouphee Saijonba*. Silk was used for making these and designs were stitched of velvet material.

Ningthouphee Saijonba Phurit

It is a long coat given to trusted courtiers as a reward by the King. *Ningthouphee Saijonba Phurit* (Fig. 3) has designs like floral pattern with red, maroon and yellow colours (Bahadur 1997).

Saikakpa Phurit

It is a sleeveless shirt given as rewards by the King to brave warriors. It has various designs on it. One of the designs on the shirt worn by Paona Brajabasi (a nobleman) was *khoicharong* (hook design) and *waikhu mayek* (scorpion design). In this type of shirt, the borders were embroidered with the *khoi* (hook) design and the whole shirt has small red stripes with the design of *waikhu* (scorpion) embroidered within the stripes (Fig. 4). The designs were embroidered with silk threads.

Designs on the Male Upper Garment

Pumyaat

It is a kurta stitched from silk or cotton cloth. The silk *pumyaat* is of cream or yellowish in colour and the cotton *pumyaat* is of white colour. Generally there is no design on the *pumyaat* and it is worn at the time of auspicious occasions and functions like marriage, *Mangaani Chaakouba* (a luncheon at the bride's place on the fifth day after marriage), *Naa Hutpa* (ear piercing ceremony), *Shasti puja* (puja on the sixth day after the birth of a child) and *Shraddh* (death ritual).

Designs on the Male Lower Garment

Pheijom

It is cotton dhoti of white colour worn at the time of auspicious occasions like marriage, *Naa Hutpa* (ear piercing ceremony) and *Shraddh* (death ritual) along with *pumyaat*. There is no design on the dhoti except for a line at the border. While wearing a *pheijom*, pleats are made at the front which acts as the design.

Khamenchatpa

Khamenchatpa (Fig. 5) has circular type of design which resembles large and small floral motifs and is believed to be the copy of the back of a serpent (Devi 2007). The design was imprinted on a silk dhoti with deep purple colour and was given as a reward by Meitei Kings to men of merit. The design cannot be used by common people and it was strictly followed during the time of monarchy. The design is printed on the dhoti using wooden blocks. This particular design was used only on dhoti in the beginning, but later it came to be used on shirts, *Innaphi* (shawl), *Khwangchet* (cloth worn around the waist over dhoti) and turbans.

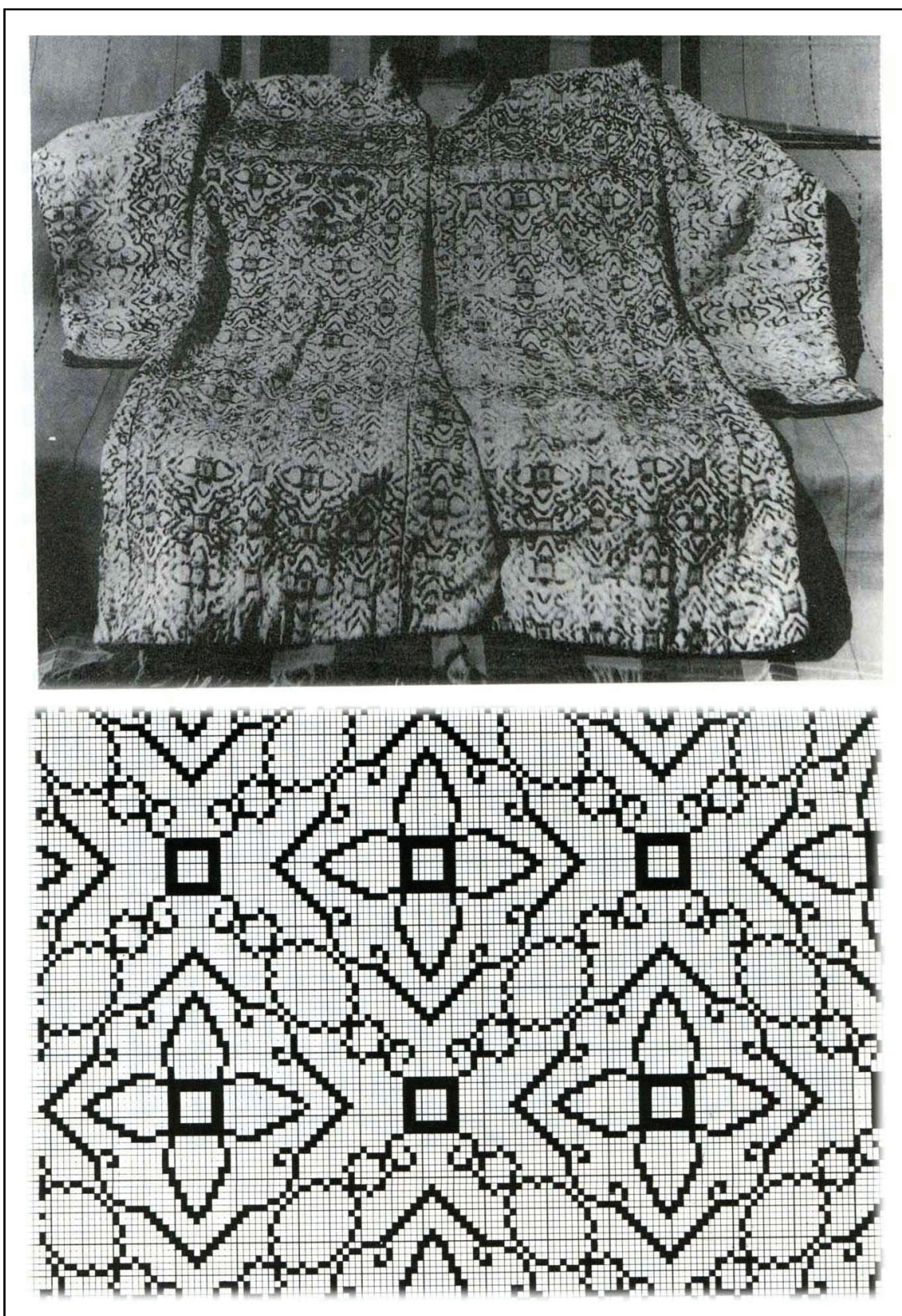


Figure 3: Nighthouphée Saijnba Phurit and Details of Design
(Courtesy: Bahadur 1977)



Figure 4: Saikakpa Phurit and Details of Design (Courtesy: Bahadur 1977)

Designs on the Female Upper Garment

Resom Phurit

It is a velvet shirt in which the gold threads studded with small brass pieces are stitched on both the sleeves. Sometimes, the threads are stitched around the neck and front portion of the shirt. It is worn by bride and girls at the time of *Laai Haraoba* (festival of the sylvan deities) dance. This type of shirt is also worn by the male *Pena* (a traditional musical instrument) singers. The colour of the shirt is usually bright shades of green, violet and red.

Innapphi

It is a shawl worn over the blouse by Meitei ladies. The *innaphi* worn during marriages and other auspicious occasions are woven from silk and cotton. Different designs are embroidered on the cloth with silk or cotton threads. The cotton shawl is generally in white colour with designs in white coloured thread or rarely with colourful designs. The border of the cotton *innaphi* has the *moirangphee* or temple design. The silk *innaphi* are usually of all kinds of colours like red, green, blue, yellow and pink with mostly floral designs with and without borders.

Namthang Khut Hat

The *Namthang Khut Hat* (Fig. 6) is a silk lace preferably of yellow colour where the design is embroidered with silk thread and is used along with the *innaphi* or sometimes attached at the border of the *innaphi*. It has a design of the head of a serpent '*Pakhangba*' (considered as the God of the Meiteis) (Devi 2007). The *namthang khut hat* is also worn along with the turban by the groom.

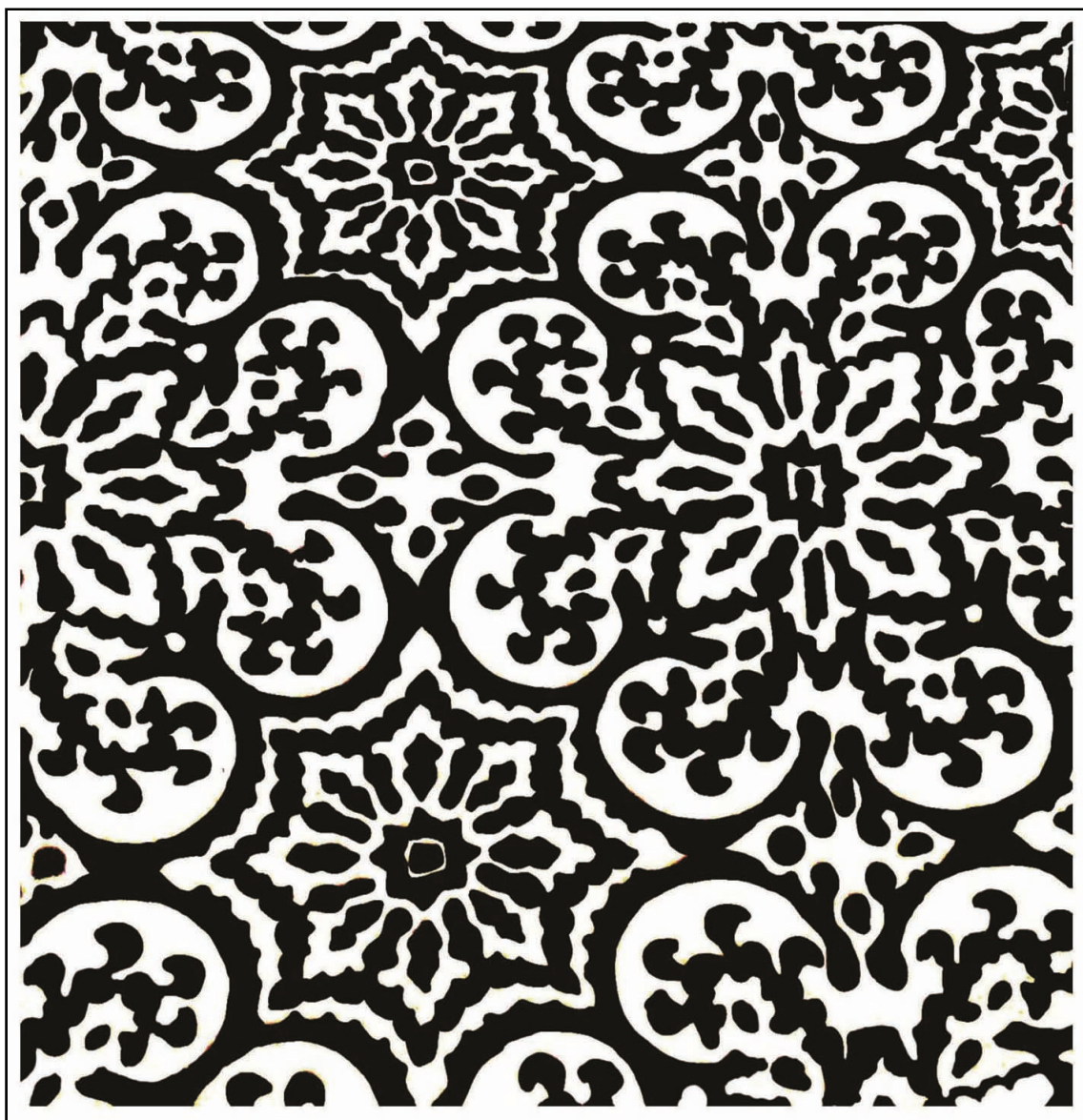


Figure 5: Khamen Chatpa Design

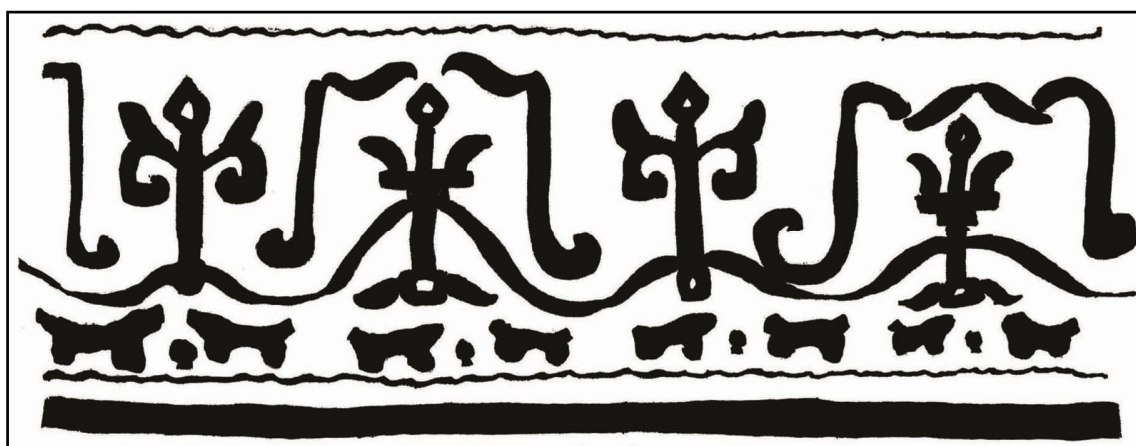


Figure 6: Details of the Design in Namthang Khut Hat

Harao Phichil

It is a type of lace which is used with muslins by women during the *Laa Haraoba* (festival of the forest or tree deities. The *Meiteis* believe that every locality is protected by the tree deities of the area. The *Laa Haraoba* festival is celebrated every year in almost all the localities for a period of ten days or one month generally in the month of May or *kaalen* in Manipuri calendar to please the tree deities). The lace has white colour *khoi akoibi* design with green colour as the background and the border at the length has red colour stripes.

Designs on the Female Lower Garment

One of the traditional textiles of the Meitei female is a type of lower garment called *Phanek*. The *phanek* is two pieces of cloth stitched in the middle and is either made on loom manually or by machines nowadays. The *phanek* woven from looms and embroidered manually are more expensive than the ones woven and embroidered from machines. There are different types of *phanek* and each *phanek* is usually worn on auspicious occasions or used as daily wear. Various types of designs are used on different types of *phaneks*.

Pumngou Phanek

The plain *phanek* with no border or a single line at the border is known as *Pumngou Phanek*. Light pink or cream colour *pumngou phanek* is worn during religious ceremonies and also during the time of mourning. *Pumngou phanek* which is white in colour is worn by the *Maibis* (priestess). The *pumngou phanek* of bright colours are found either with no design or with *moirangphee* design on the border. This type of *pumngou phanek* is used for daily wear or sometimes during auspicious ceremonies also. All the above mentioned *pumngou phanek* are made out of cotton. The silk *pumngou phanek* of bright colours with *moirangphee* design on the border is worn during *Mapaam Chaakouba* (a luncheon at the bride's place on the fifth day after marriage).

Mayek Naibi Phanek

Mayek Naibi phanek is either made of cotton or silk. The *phanek* is worn only on auspicious ceremonies. The cotton ones are worn on weddings by maidens and the silk ones are generally worn by married ladies on the occasion of *Mangaani Chakkouba* (a luncheon at the bride's place on the fifth day after marriage). This *phanek* has stripes of two or three different colours with black and white as dominant colours. This type of *phanek* mostly has white and black as dominant colours. The border is embroidered with a design called the *Khoi akoibi mayek*. In Manipuri, *Khoi* means bee or hook and *akoibi* means round. As the name suggests, the design is like a hook. The design is first printed using wooden block carved with the particular design and silk thread is used to embroider over the lines of the prints. The embroidery on the border of the *phanek* with *khoi* (hook) design was introduced during the reign of Meetingu Yanglou Keiphaba (AD 969-984) (Parrat 2005).

There are three types of embroidery work on the borders of *Mayek Naibi Phanek*.

1. *Khoijao Lonbi Mapan Naibi* (Fig. 7)

This cloth has a series of circular designs with one end facing inward and the other end facing outward. The outward end opens up upwards and downwards alternately. The design was given the name '*Khoijao*' which means big hook or bee. The outline of the circular design is a thick black line and the inner part is filled up with black colour.

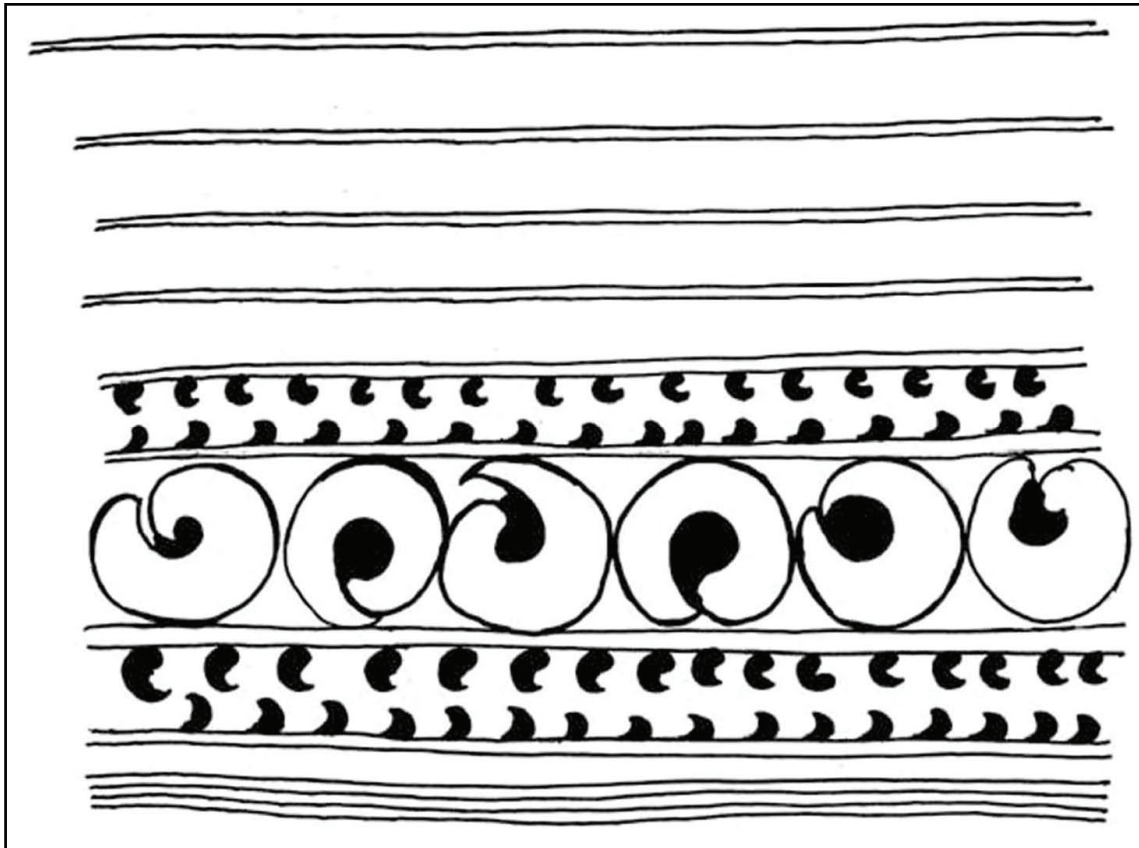


Figure 7: *Khoijao Lonbi Mapan Naini* Design

2. *Khoi Akoibi Mapan Naibi* (Fig. 8)

It is a series of spherical frames which are separated by a local design called *Tenga*, which represents a bow and an arrow. Inside the spherical frames are diamond shaped designs with two tendril or hook like patterns on each of the outer lines. A floral design is at the centre of the diamond shaped design. The innermost circle of the floral design represents a pitcher and the outer ones represent the seeds of cucumber and seeds of apple. The whole pattern is termed as *khoi* (hook) and the design is known as *khoi akoibi* (*akoibi* means roundness) (Devi 1998).

3. *Hija Mayek*

The pattern is flanked by two stripes; the top is of a series of oval shape with two lines somewhat similar to fish. The bottom is a series of curved 'W' which is similar to the Manipuri alphabet 'Sam' or the nandipada alternately facing upward and downward. The strip of the *phanek* has only two colours. It has series of creeper design. The adjacent design seems like a butterfly facing upward and downward alternately.



Figure 8: Khoi Akoibi Maban Naibi Design

It is believed that the design was taken from the cross section of a timber and modified with some ornamentation. The design was named *Hija Mayek* (design of the Hijam family) as it is said that the first person to introduce this design was from the Hijam family of *Luwang* clan. This type of *phanek* is given the name '*Lukhra phanek*' which means *phanek* of the widows as widows generally wear this type of *phanek*.

Another type of *Mayek Naibi Phanek* is the *Chinphi* or the *Tungkap Phanek*. This type of *phanek* has an unembroidered border. This *phanek* is smaller as compared to the usual *Phanek* and is offered to the female deities of the *Meiteis*. It is also used to dress female babies on the day of *Shasti puja* (puja on the sixth day after the birth of a child).

Kanap

It is one of the coronation dresses used by the chief Queen of Manipur. There are two types of this *phanek* found, purely woven having embroidered broad border or without embroidered broad border and full embroidered designs throughout the body. The *kanap phanek* is generally worn a little shorter over another *phanek*. This type of *phanek* is kept for the *Umanglais* (forest or tree deities. These *Umanglaais* are believed by the *Meiteis* to be the protector of different localities).

Other Miscellaneous Textiles

Lanphee

Lanphee (Fig. 9) is a shawl in red colour with borders at all the four sides. The border at the extreme length portion of the shawl has a creeper of black colour, flower buds of



Figure 9: Lanphee (Courtesy: Bahadur 1977)

red and white colours and other floral designs of red and orange colours with yellow colour in the background. The broad border has floral and creeper designs of a bigger size which is fitted in between two broad lines of dark green colour. It has netted ends at both the sides with long threads. The embroidery is done with silk thread. This shawl was worn by Manipuri soldiers going out for war. Only a few people who were awarded this shawl as a reward by the King used to get the special privilege to wear this shawl in the past (Dhamija 1964).

Sami Lami shawl (Fig. 10)

The name literally means shawl with animal design. It is generally worn by the Naga tribe. It was used by the King of Manipur to reward the worthy tribes or to be presented to the tribal chiefs. As the name suggests, this shawl has a number of animals depicted on it. It is divided into 5 units where in each unit there are depiction of horses, elephants, fishes, sun, moon, stars and buffalo horns with dark blue colour in the background. Other colours used were red, yellow, green and white. The designs were embroidered using cotton thread (Bahadur 1997).



Figure 10: Sami Lami Shawl (Courtesy: Bahadur 1977)

Leirum

Leirum is a coarse cotton bedcover which is traditionally an important cloth to be carried by the bride to the bridegroom's place. It is customary to wrap the bridegroom's pillow and mattress with the *leirum*. The *leirum* has a design consisting of red, black and white stripes. The white rows are in the middle with small black lines separating each of them and the adjacent sides have black and red rows alternately. The black rows are actually small sized black and white boxes in chess board pattern.

Conclusions

With the change of time and modernization, Meitei men and women preferred the western outfits like pants, shirts, shorts and skirts compared to the traditional outfit. The traditional dresses are worn only during festival and auspicious occasions. The textiles which were used earlier during the monarchical times lost their importance but people still restrict themselves from using the designs and textiles which were used by the royal family. It is also believed that the designs like khamenchatpa can be given only as rewards by the King. At present, the *khamenchatpa* is used but the design is little modified for fear of any untoward incident to the wearer. The younger generation hardly knows about the importance and purpose of the designs on textiles which were strictly followed during the monarchical times. In spite of all these, in the Meitei society, the traditional dress is still given importance. Even if the western cloths are worn, at the time of functions and auspicious occasions like marriage, *Mangaani Chakkouba* (a luncheon at the bride's place on the fifth day after marriage), *Naa Hutpa* (ear piercing ceremony), *Shasti puja* (puja on the sixth day after the birth of a child) and *Shraddh* (death ritual) it is customary to wear the traditional dresses and often used by young people who are traditionally bound. The Meitei musicians and performing artists are also responsible for keeping the traditions of wearing the indigenous dresses alive. Even though the textiles have undergone changes where the designs have been modified and the material has been mixed sometimes with the artificial silk, the traditional textiles have always survived and enough importance is still given to it especially during ceremonial occasions. At present, the value of these hand-woven textiles is still high.

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