

WEAVING TRADITIONS AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AMONG THE KABUI (RONGMEI) TRIBE

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the role of women in the traditional weaving among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe in Manipur. Women empowerment through traditional weaving of clothes was also studied through the lens of Autoethnography. Twenty Kabui (Rongmei) weavers between the age group of 20 to 40 years were interviewed using semi-structured interview in the local Kabui (Rongmei) dialect. Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyze the data which was transcribed from Kabui (Rongmei) dialect to English. The outcome of the study alludes that weaving traditional clothes were primarily engaged by women using traditional method of weaving i.e., loin loom or back strap loom. The traditional motifs and designs identifying the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe were still used by the weavers. It was also observed that some contemporary designs were integrated in the traditional clothes and other accessories to reflect modernity and aesthetic looks. Search for alternative jobs and source of income were mostly reported by the weavers. Financial independence, self-reliance, sustainability and upliftment of women in the society were also reflected as reasons for the active participations of women in weaving traditional clothes and accessories. Women empowerment through skill development and sharing of traditional knowledge as well as creative ideas for promotion and preservation of traditional clothes and Kabui (Rongmei) identity were also highlighted by the weavers.

Keyword: - *Traditional weaving, women empowerment, financial independence, skill development, identity*

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Weaving is an integral part of the Kabui (Rongmei) society from time immemorial. Traditionally, it is the women who engages in the creation and production of indigenous clothes worn by men, women and children. The practice of weaving is still seen among the women both in the hills and valley districts of Manipur. Though weaving could be seen practicing mostly in rural areas, many young girls could also be seen practicing the art of weaving in cities as well using the traditional method of weaving i.e., loin loom or back strap loom. There are different types of traditional clothes for men, women and children. Some of them are highlighted below:

For men – *Lenglan, Langshem, Senlam, Pheilaak, Mashin Pheipong, Pheingao, Songnai etc.*

For female – *Langjin pheishoi, Langhu (Langmu) pheishoi, Lengli pheishoi, Khim pheishoi, Langdai pheishoi, Hekkin pheishoi, Taramdui pheishoi etc.*

For Children – *Sanglophei, Pangchaphhei, Langjin pheishoi, Lengli pheishoi etc.*

The Kabui tribe is recognized as a tribe under (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 (Part III - Rules and Orders under the Constitution of India). It is also known as the Rongmei tribe which is recognized by the Constitution (Scheduled

Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2011. The Kabui (Rongmei) tribe are mostly inhabited in the three North-Eastern states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

Marangmei (2012) identified and described the different clothes and ornaments of men, women and children worn in different festivals, occasions and everyday life. Since different clothes and ornaments are worn specifically for specific occasions and rituals, the Kabui (Rongmei) weavers are conscious of the importance of traditional clothes and they are woven keeping in mind the cultural importance and identity of the community. Kamei (2004) reflected the importance of “culture consciousness” as a unique character of the Zeliangrong people and includes technology, economic organization, social system, religious beliefs, language, literature etc. within the ambit of culture. The culture consciousness among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe could also be seen through its rich festivals such as *Gaan-Ngai*, *Rih-Ngai*, *Gudui-Ngai* etc. It is also reflected in its traditional dresses, folk songs, folk dances, folk tales etc practiced by males, females and children among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe. Kamson (2015) acknowledges the beauty and fondness of ornaments among the womenfolk. The traditional knowledge of weaving and the art of ornaments were taught to children by mother and it was considered the responsibility of a mother to teach her daughter the art of weaving from tender age. Women’s engagement in the cultural materials production and consumption is an integral part of the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe. Rongmei (1994) highlights the importance of customary ornaments and weaving traditions among the male and female which were used in different occasions and festivals. Appreciation of indigenous clothes and its aesthetic elements were also reflected in the traditional folk songs (Majaluh and Lamlonlu) and in folk dances.

OBJECTIVES:

The primary focus of the study is to explore the role of women in the traditional weaving and women empowerment among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe in Manipur. Following objectives were identified for the study.

1. To explore how women engages in the production of traditional clothes,
2. To understand the different methods and techniques used in the weaving, and
3. To study women empowerment through various entrepreneurial endeavours in weaving.

Based on the objectives, following research questions were formulated:

- a) How are women engaged in the traditional weaving process?
- b) What are the various methods employed in the weaving?
- c) What are the different roles of women and gender in women empowerment?

METHOD:

There are different methods used to explore and understand the objectives of this study. Autoethnography method was used to systematically explore, understand and write the weaving traditions among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe of Manipur from an insider’s perspectives. Stratified random sampling was used for identifying the participants from both the hill and valley districts of Manipur. A total of 20 (twenty) participants were identified and interviewed using semi-structured interview. The participants were between the age group of 20 to 40 years. All the interviews were conducted in the local Kabui (Rongmei) dialect. The interviews were transcribed into English for the final analysis of the data. Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis (TA) was used as an analytical tool to identify the codes, subthemes and themes for this study. Since many local words do not have the exact English translations, nearest English meaning/translations were used for the purpose of analysis and interpretations. Participant’s consent was taken for sharing the information used in this study.

ANALYSIS:

Based on the transcribed data, Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis (TA) was used for analysis. Following are the analysis of the data.

Analysis 1:

Based on the first objective i.e., to explore how women engages in the production of traditional clothes, a participant reflected –

“Women of our tribe [Kabui(Rongmei)] are very hardworking and most of the time they are engaged in something which would contribute to the family and society. But out of the many engagements, weaving is most common and the art of weaving is an integral part of women’s life. A Kabui (Rongmei) women is defined by how well she can

creatively weave our traditional clothes. It reflects the true identity of women. Beauty of a Kabui (Rongmei) women is not just judged by her looks but also on the ways in which she can beautifully and skillfully weave our traditional clothes. Back strap loom is the most common weaving method which have been practicing since ages. Unlike other household works, weaving is both an art and way of life. There are different motifs and patterns used in different clothes which have different meanings. It can't be interchanged. There are no seasons for weaving and all women inherited the art of weaving from their grandparents and for generations".

The response from the participant alludes that it is majorly the women who are engaged in the weaving of traditional clothes through backstrap loom. The weaving traditions are both skills and art which signifies the importance of clothes and identity of the community. The motifs and border designs like the *paa-baan*, *tarampei*, *kaphok*, *kaphan* etc of the Kabui (Rongmei) are still practiced in the traditional clothes and accessories. Sharing the knowledge and creative ideas among the weavers are also part of the weaving traditions.

Analysis 2:

Based on the second objective i.e., to understand the different methods and techniques used in the weaving, a participant highlighted –

"A very common method used by us in traditional weaving is back strap loom. It is easy to manage and weave through backstrap. These days many weavers have started different methods in their own convenient ways, but most weavers prefer to use the backstrap loom. Burmese loom are also used in Tamenglong but they are costly and need special expertise"

The response alludes that the weavers are still using the traditional back strap or loin loom though Burmese loom could also be seen using in Tamenglong district of Manipur. The popularity of the use of backstrap loom is the ease of weaving and managing the parts as well as cost effectiveness in the entire process of weaving. The exact same method was seen across most of the villages both in hills and valleys.

Analysis 3:

Based on the third objective i.e., to study women empowerment through various entrepreneurial endeavours in weaving, a participant narrates –

"Women's welfare and upliftment in our society is a very important aspect of our life. Showing the right direction and providing adequate training so that skills and personality development could be brought about should also be considered. Through weaving, I am able to generate an alternative source of income for myself as well as for my family. Not just that, I am giving jobs to others who wants to engage in weaving. Financial freedom can also be achieved through this endeavour. Along with it, it is also important that we preserve and promote our traditional clothes so that we can preserve and promote our Kabui (Rongmei) identity as well. Women should take pride in their weaving and should pass on to the next generations".

It could be clearly observed that the weavers need social support and right direction so that the goal of financial freedom, self-reliance and women empowerment is achieved. Weaving is not just a profession but it is a way to preserve and promote the Kabui (Rongmei) identity as well. Need for adequate training to enhance the skills of the weavers were also highlighted in the response.

DISCUSSIONS:

Traditional weaving of clothes has been practicing by the Kabui (Rongmei) weavers from time immemorial. Most of the weavers were women who took pride in the weaving and helped in preserving and promoting the indigenous clothes. The main themes that emerged in this study were traditional methods of weaving; social support system; women empowerment; alternative sources of income, preservation and promotion of identity; women entrepreneurship etc. The method and technique used in the weaving were mostly back strap or loin loom which could be seen practicing in both the hills and valley districts of Manipur. Apart from the traditional method, some weavers also use Burmese loom but due to complexities and cost involved in buying and managing it, many weavers prefer the traditional back strap loom over the Burmese loom.

Sharing of creative ideas and training the young girls to hone their weaving skills were very much part of the weaving traditions among the women weavers. Financial freedom and self-reliance for sustainable growth through weaving entrepreneurship was clearly visible among the weavers. The importance of weaving was also reflected in the growing number of women weavers and young girls who were taught the art of weaving at a very young age. Social support and providing adequate facilities and training were also highlighted by many weavers to sustain the weaving traditions. Non availability of raw materials on time due to constant blockade and transportation issues in the state were also some of the challenges faced by the weavers. Nevertheless, the weaver's determination to empower the women and children to preserve and promote the indigenous clothes and Kabui (Rongmei) identity were the main pillars for their weaving entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSIONS:

The present study explores the role of women in the traditional weaving among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe in Manipur and women empowerment through weaving entrepreneurship. The outcome of the study alludes that majority of the weavers are women (both married and unmarried) who took up weaving to support the family and for alternative source of income. The most common method used in weaving was the back strap or loin loom though Burmese loom could also be seen using in Tamenglong district. The role of women in the production, preservation and promotion of indigenous clothes and Kabui (Rongmei) identity could be clearly seen through their constant engagement in weaving entrepreneurship. Financial independence, self-reliance, sustainability and upliftment of women in the society were also reflected as reasons for the active participations of women in weaving traditional clothes and accessories. Women empowerment through skill development and sharing of traditional knowledge as well as creative ideas for promotion and preservation of traditional clothes and Kabui (Rongmei) identity were also highlighted by the weavers.

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