



# Material Culture and Modernity

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the material culture of Zou tribe of Manipur who belongs to the Kuki- Chin group a sub family of the Tibeto- Burman branch. They are recognised as Scheduled Tribes of Manipur (1956) with population of 12,195 according to 2011 census with 76.7 per cent concentration in Churachandpur district while the remaining 23.3 per cent are sparsely scattered in the entire district. Though small in number they maintained their identity with pride and manage to uphold their custom and culture. The major aim of the paper is to investigate the relationship between the Zou tribe and their material culture in the light of change and time. The paper has been formulated on the basis of available literature coupled with extensive fieldwork among the Zous of Churachandpur district, Manipur. Methodological techniques like observation, interview and group discussion have been used for collection of primary data. Besides, secondary data has been collected through available books, magazines, journals, local writer accounts, and e-resources.

## Introduction

Every tribal group has its own traits of behaviour. These particular traits of behaviour as a group distinguish them from other homogeneous groups. We may associate these traits as cultural traits of behaviour, and these particular expressions of social relationships of homogeneous groups give them a cultural identity. Culture is a way of life of a group of people- the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Cultural life refers to those practices such as art, music, dance, song etc. that binds group together. The Zou tribe has different types of traditional handicraft similar with that of the various Kuki-Chin tribes. Apart from the various basic household goods, the Zous being an agriculturalist society from the early time have their own traditional agricultural tools, weaving of different types of traditional costumes and basket etc. They also have their own traditional musical instruments which go hand in hand with their socio-agricultural life. The basis of their daily life maintenance from their household activities to their economy is solely dependent on handicraft

works. Almost all the handicraft works are derived from bamboo and cane since they are easily accessible in the forest and around their settlement. In the traditional set up of the Zou society, every household have had one or more person expertise in weaving and other crafts especially the elders. This knowledge is learnt or passes on through mothers to daughter and father to son or grandson as it is the base of their tradition.

## Agricultural Tools

The traditional agricultural implements of the Zous are based on simple technology. They used simple implement like dao, axe, hoe, and sickle made by the village Blacksmith.

1) *Tempawng*: *Tempawng* (dao) is a knife with a triangular blade three inches wide at the end and half an inch at the handle. It is ground with a chisel edge, the broad end being also sharpened. This is used for clearing the jungle and the broad end is used for grubbing the holes in which the seed are placed. The handle is made of bamboo.

2. *Heita*: This refers to an axe with which trees or its branches are cut with. It is also used for cutting up logs for firewood. The head is made of iron about one and half inches wide at the edges and tapers almost to a pointed. The handle is made with a piece of bamboo or any strong tree trunk, the head being thrust through the tough root portion.

3. *Tuda/Tuta*: It is a hoe that closely resembles the axes, the heads being a little lighter and broader. It is commonly used for weeding, digging holes etc. The head is made of iron and the handle is made of bamboo or any strong tree trunk.

Apart from agricultural tools they also made used of different basket made from bamboo to suit their agricultural needs. Some traditional made baskets of the Zous are:

- 1) *Seu* (beng): A basket made from bamboo especially design to carry un-husked rice. It is a truncated cone shape, used as a paddy measure, both when selling and when paying a chief's share. Beside they are also used for carrying other varieties of crops from the jhum field after harvest.
- 2) *Paipenh*: A bamboo or cane basket much smaller than *Seu*. It is a close one usually use while sowing agricultural seeds.
- 3) *Kawngvang*: A basket made from bamboo and cane. It is commonly used for carrying fire wood for domestic use. In the early days, scarcity of water makes the women to carry water filled with bamboo tubes using *Kawngvang*. The design of *Kawngvang* and *Seu* is slightly different. While *Seu* is a closed one, *Kawngvang* on the other hand has an opening all over it.
- 4) *Nam*: It is a cane rope design to carry *Seu* and *Kawngvang*. It is design in such a way that the middle portion of the rope is flattened so that one can feel comfortable while placing it on the forehead in carrying loads.

- 5) *Law*: *Law* is also made from bamboo and cane design to keep vegetables. It is a basket container usually round in shape. This basket is much shorter than *Seu*.
- 6) *Gawdal*: It is a round shape bamboo and cane made flatten basket. The size of it varies accordingly. The smaller one is use as a winnower while the bigger one is use for drying rice in the sun or on top of the fireplace.
- 7) *Sum*: This refers to mortar and pestle. It is curved out of any strong wood. The grains are put in the mortar and crushed by using the pestle which required strong labour power.

## Weaving

Besides agricultural work and household activities, the women folk are engage in weaving and knitting different types of cloths. Weaving is usually done along with agricultural and household work. The women whenever free would be engage in weaving for the family from making blankets to producing traditional costumes with different designs. Traditional weaving method of the Zous involves different stages starting from harvesting of cotton grown in the cotton field locally called *Patlei*. After which the cotton is dried in the sun for two to three days. The materials employed hereafter include the following:

- 1) *Helhhawt*: The well dried cotton is separate from the seed by using a homemade wooden Gin having two rollers closely fitted. The frames of the cotton gins are made from *Vong Sing* and the roller from *Se Sing* or *Thennou Sing*.
- 2) *Patsai/Patkap*: After separating the seed, to make the cotton soft it is thrash with a string bow. The bow is made of *Gova* (bamboo) and the string of *chiing* (cane). The string is first tied to the base and then to the top of the stave, the space between the string and the stave being less at the bottom than at the top.
- 3) *Mui*: The cotton is then spin in a wheel made from wood and cane and the spindle (*thaltang*) made from iron. The base and the stand are made of *Vongsing*. The handle to turn the wheel is attached to the axle. The axle is made of *Tuum*. At the end of the dovetailed stem is placed a three pronged support made from *Nahkai*, which holds the spindle in position. A split cane loop is fix as a tyre. The spokes of the wheel are made of *vongsing*. The loop made of cane encircles both the wheel and the spindle. To keep the spinning wheel firmly, a stone is generally placed on the stand. As the spinning wheel is turned the cotton wool is gradually spun into a thread. The thread is removed and wound on a thread holder called *Vaudit/Patdit* made of bamboo. The thread is then boiled with rice water called *Buhtuinang* and henceforth put to dry in the sun.
- 4) *Sutlam*: The dry threads are then placed on a thread winder called *Sutlam* made of bamboo and wood. Its base is a pedestal formed from four spreading branch growing out of one stem, which turned upside down, form the four feet of the pedestal, or made out of a piece of wood. On the upright stem, a bamboo joint revolves. This pedestal stands about two feet high. The stem is pared down to about two inches in

diameter, so that a joint of bamboo can cover it. This joint of bamboo is about eight inches long and three or four in diameter. Four arms made of split bamboo about two feet long and one inch wide is inserted through these holes overlapping each other. The thread is then wound into balls called *Patlum* or *Vautuo* ready to be weaved.

## Traditional Dress

The Zou tribe of today has various traditional clothes ranging from olden days to a modified new one. Many of these clothes are distinctively used by men and women since the earliest time by their forefathers. They are the pride and privilege of the Zou people wherever they are. There could hardly be any household where any one of these traditional clothes is totally absent. Due to lack of written historical documents on their cultural and traditional identities, the exact year of their original traditional attires are not known, but the history of Zou traditional dresses can be traced from 1950, when Col. Khenzaming, the commander of 2nd Chin Rifle in Shwedaung village in Burma requested *Sein Maung* (a textile man) to make *Tuolpuon* (the oldest Zou traditional dress) for himself. Along with that, Zou traditional skirt *Zounih*, *tangching* and *puonjem* (stripe dress) was also made for the first time. These dresses are woven by themselves with different designs and patterns. Apart from recently modified ones, the Zou people have four major *Nam Puon* (Cultural Dresses), viz. *Zou Tuolpuon*, *Zou Puondum*, *Zou Puonlaisan*, *Zou nih*, *Zou Puon-ah*.

On the basis of style of wearing, traditional dresses of the Zou tribes are classified as follows:

**Mens' Dress:** Men's dresses normally include *tuolpuon*, *puonlaisan*, *waist-coat* and *necktie*.

*Puonlaisa* is a small piece of shawl usually worn around the head and waist. It is a mixture of red, pink, yellow and white colours and the edges are embellished with a white cloth. It is one of the most important traditional cloths generally worn by men in times of *Sa-ai*, festive events or on joyous occasions.

*Toulpuon* is another important dress worn by men folk in the earlier days. It is made of locally grown cotton. It reaches till the knees or slightly above, with long sleeve open in the front. It is thick and white in colour without any design. It is commonly worn by the men while performing traditional dances.

Waist Coat is a modified version of the *Zou puondum* and *puonlaisan*. A western waist-coat is emboldened with *puondum* or *puonlaisan* in the front side.

Men folk also use a very distinct necktie which is made of *Zou puonlaisan* and *puondum* in every special occasion.

**Women Dress:** Women's dresses normally include *Zou nih*, a wrap-round. It is made of white, red and black combination with different design and pattern. On the borders are woven beautiful designs of *tangmaimu*, *maimu*

and *khiangkhawi*. This skirt is believed to be firstly brought out from Mualbem in the Chin Hills. *Zou Puondum* is another important dress of the zou worn by the women folks on particular occasion like funeral, festivals and eventually worn during winter. *Zou Puondum* is a combination of black, green, yellow and white. Almost all of the above mentioned traditional costumes of the Zous are of different colour such as black, yellow, green, white etc. There is no costume made without the colour white.

Recently, the Zou apex body United Zou Organisation in its General Assembly approved to modify its traditional dress specifically for mourning or funeral services which was already in used by the people.

### **Musical Instrument**

Music also occupies another important non material culture of the Zous. Besides they are used on all special occasion and even in times of death. There are different kinds of traditional musical instruments used separately for different songs and dances. The musical instruments are briefly discussed as under:

**Dak:** *Dak* is a Zou indigenous gong. It is made of huge mass of brass with a ball-like circle bulging out at the centre on which the beating of the gong is done to produce sound. It is played/ used at the time of festivals, death, village meetings and on rituals. It is used as one of the items of bride price at the time of marriage, and as a fine of divorce. There are different types of gongs depending on their sizes. They are *Dakpi*, *Dakbu* and *Dahta*. *Dakpi* is the biggest and most valued of the gongs. Besides it is used on all important occasions and in times of death. *Dakbu* consists of three gongs of equal size, each with a separate note. *Dahta* is the smallest gong.

**Khuang:** *Khuang* is the indigenous drum of the Zous. It is made from animal skin. There are different types of drums used by the Zous; *Khuangpi/Khuanglien* (big/large drum), *Khuanglai* (medium size drum) and *Khuangta* (small drum).

**Pengkul:** It is an indigenous traditional trumpet of the Zous. It is made of rare species of bamboo called *Gotha*, and a mithun horn fixed at the one end through which the sound comes out when blown from the other end. In olden days this instrument was used as a bell or time table for the villagers which include time to rise, time to go to the field, time to return from field and time to rest.

**Gausem:** *Gausem* is a bagpipe. It is very important indigenous musical instrument played mainly by the men folk. It is made of a combination of gourd and seven bamboo tubes. Seven pieces of hollow bamboo reeds of various lengths are inserted into the gourd; one, to serve as a mouthpiece, and the others, which are of various lengths, have small holes cut in them. The bamboo reeds are fixed with wax to one side of the gourd in two rows- four bamboo reeds horizontally in the front and three vertically in the rear. The instrument is played by inhaling and exhaling. It produces seven different sounds while inhaling and another seven sounds while exhaling.

**Tamngai:** *Tamngai* is an indigenous flute made up of bamboo tube. It has six holes. It has a base hole bigger than the rest, which is used for blowing; and the rest is used for controlling the sound so as to produce different tunes. *Tamngai* was commonly used by the boys in wooing the girls in olden days.

**Phiit:** *Phiit* is a peculiar indigenous whistle. It is made of bamboo tube. In earlier days, when a big wild animal is killed in a game, a group of men played this musical instrument to welcome the hunters. It is also used for performing *Saguol-kengkai* dance.

**Pelkhuang:** *Pelkhuang* or guitar is the only stringed musical instrument used. This has been in use from generations. It is made of typical wood called *Vongsing*. It consists of four to six strings and is widely used for singing the modern song.

**Sielki:** *Sielki* is the horn of a mithun. It plays an important role in day to day life of the Zou people. In olden days, it was used as a trumpet for circulating information in the village or an area. It is also commonly used as a musical instrument which harmonized other instruments especially during group singing called *lengkhawm*.

## Conclusion

Every society whether in its stage of primitivism or how modern it is have had their own traditional culture which changes continuously but still retain its importance. The material culture of one's own society arises out of the basic needs of an individual. And as society grows and change, changes also occurred in the material culture to suit the required needs. Similarly, like the many tribes, the Zous are not exempted from this. The once valued materials of early days which satisfy most of the basic needs of the society are no longer in used. Modernisation and contact with other culture have affected all spheres of their everyday life like the way of dressing, cooking, living, and means of subsistence. However, inspite of the many changes most of the traditional craft are not totally lost or forgotten. Since the economy of most of the Zous is still largely based on agriculture, agricultural tools and basketry still occupies an important place. Though Western cloths have replaced their way of dressing, the traditional hand woven one's retained its importance. Infact their value have grown and is wore only on special occasion. The same is also observed with regards to music. Inspite of the influence of western music, they manage to preserve and uphold their traditional one. It is thus observed that the Zous are not opposed to modernity rather embraced it for all round development but at the same time retain their cultural practices with pride. Modernity cannot do away with their custom and culture.

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