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WONDER WEAVES: STUDY OF SELF RELIANT WOMEN WORKERS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *KOUNA*, (*SCIRPUS LACUSTRIES.LINN.*) MAT MAKING FROM MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Kouna mat are important household articles which are used for variety of purposes like eating, sitting and sleeping and ceremonial purposes in Manipur. The art of mat-weaving from rush, local name kouna is one of the women's oldest main occupations in Manipur and is closely associated with the legendary divine God "Pakhangba" (which is also regarded as Snake God). This plant kouna (Scirpus lacustris.Linn.), a matting rush grows wildy in the shallow lakes and marshy land, ponds, canals, along the river and lake beaches of Manipur Valley where paddy cultivation is not suited at all. The harvesting of Kouna plant on Friday is avoided by many planters and it is believed that the plant will die or evil consequences will befall the harvester. Hence the plant is also called 'Lady of Friday' ('Irai-Leima'). The objective of this paper will look into the country's basic craft which is of great cultural, health and economic importance with the tradition of the Meitei community and a very important part of every house of the community, Cultivation and promotion of matting rush which have been taken up as a gainful economic activity, poverty alleviation and uplift the socio-economic condition of their family and enhance employment opportunity by the Meitei women artisans and entrepreneurs in the State Manipur due to having high market demands. This research study will highlight the major transformations in the art of Weaving, its creativity products in a wide range of kouna crafts practiced by the women in Manipur with a mission to poverty alleviation and uplift the socio-economic condition of their family (poor) particularly the rural artisans.

KEYWORDS: *Kouna mat, Manipur Valley, economic importance, poverty alleviation*

INTRODUCTION

Weaving is the distinct form of art, in which the weavers or the artisan blend myths, faiths, symbols and imagination to bring an appealing dynamism to the fabric used that give every region its distinctive identity and uniqueness. The Weaving of cotton, silk and other natural fibers to bring out traditional beauty of the region's precious heritage and also providing livelihood to millions of families. Many of the world's people believe that the world is woven and that a weaving Creator wove its designs into being. The Weaver is the Female Principle of creation and the female force (of all creation) that joins all nations, all tribes, all families, and all realities together, in her web.¹ Most of Myths of weaving exist around the world as metaphors for creation as goddesses. Weaving in mythology is very ancient, and its lost mythic lore probably accompanied the early spread of this art. In traditional societies of westward of Central Asia and the Iranian plateau, weaving is considered a mystery within woman's sphere. Literally Weaving is a method of textile production in which two distinct sets of yarns or threads are interlaced at right angles to form a fabric or cloth. Similar methods are knitting, felting, and braiding or plaiting. The longitudinal threads are called the warp and the lateral threads are the weft or filling. (*Weft* or *woof* is an old English word meaning "that which is woven".² In primitive cultures weaving was practiced mainly by women and these skills and activities are kept alive by passing the skills from generation to generation.

Weaving is an age old industry in Manipur. It is one of the most important economic activity perform by women. The *Meetei* (Manipuri) cultural tradition of the art of weaving is based on a mythology, "*Leinunglon*". The supreme goddess of the *Meetei* Pantheon and Goddess *Leimarol* was said to have had introduced the art of weaving as a necessary item of work in the whole course of creation of the social universe.³ It was believed that *Leishambi* (the goddess of creation) taught the primeval ancestress (Goddess *Panthoibi*) the art of weaving and it was also believed that goddess *Panthoibi* introduced the art of weaving by imitating the pattern of weaving of a spider when its cob web.⁴ Loin loom (*khwang lyong*) was the first technique of weaving introduced for the first time in Manipur.

Weaving in Manipuri society is a women's specialty. Every woman in the house knows the art of weaving. There is no difference of women's status in learning the technique of weaving and women are taught the art of weaving from their early childhood. Besides other economic activities the art of weaving is practicing almost in every house wife of Manipur in both the hills people and valley. They weave clothes as needed by the family members. It was more of a need-based occupation and almost every woman used to receive a loom on her marriage as her dowry.⁵ Handloom industry has been playing a vital role in the state economy. The traditional skill of handloom weaving was not only a status symbol for the women-folk but it was also an indispensable aspect of the socio-economic life. Handloom weaving is by far the largest and the most important cottage industry in the state. The art of weaving has developed more in Manipur as compared to any other part of India.

¹ Dr Tricia Szirom, We are the Weavers of the Web, giasgarden.com.au

² .wikipedia.org

³ Mutua Bahadur, Traditional Textiles of Manipur, Mutua Museum, Imphal, 1997, p-10.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shodhganga.inflibnet, chapter-III, Meitei women in Traditional Economic life

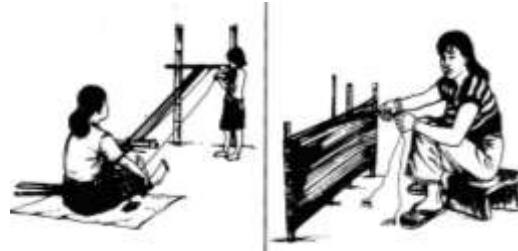


Fig-1 Warping

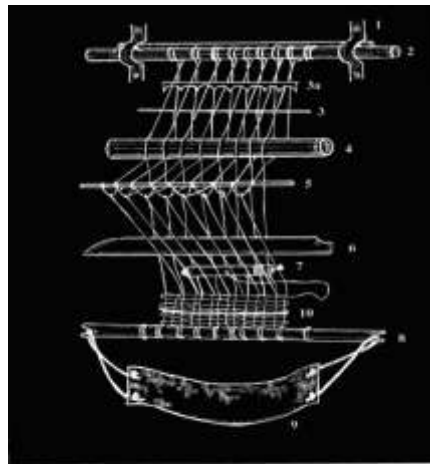


Fig-2. Khong Zing-Loin Loom

Fig-2 Loin Loom implementation in Meetei language 1. Phiban (boarder), 2. Yetpu /front bar, 3. Nayetchei, 4. Utong /Bamboo-bar, 5. Sunachei/ Heald-bar, 6. Tem/ Sword, 7. Pagatem/shuttle, 8. Yetpu Kanaibi/Breast-Bar and 9. Sanam/Back-strap⁶

⁶ Mutua Bahadur, Tribal hand woven fabrics of Manipur, Part 4. This article was webcasted on August 01, 2012.

Manipur has 3.40 lakh weavers and 2.77 looms producing 8.64 million meters of handloom fabrics and consuming 1 million Kg. of yarn per month as per the National Handloom Census, 1996-97. Of this, about 30% of the total weavers are under Co-operative fold and 70% are outside the Cooperative fold.⁷ While handicrafts industry started originally as traditional part time activities in rural areas without any significant market demand over the years, but it has been transformed into a flourishing industry. Current trends of handicrafts product is not only restricted to aesthetic or artistic value but incorporation of design and new ideas make these products into daily utility items broadening the marketability as well as scope of handicrafts products. Manipur has the highest handicrafts units as well as highest number of craftspeople comprising of skilled and semi-skilled artisan in the entire north eastern region. The existing resource pool in terms of skilled and semi-skilled craftspeople provide enough scope for further expansion and investment primarily into product innovation & designing, value addition, and production technique. *Kauna (Scirpus lacustris)* craft has the potential for large scale plantation, production and marketing. *Kauna* products have both domestic and export market demands. The surging demands surpass the current production of *kauna* in the State. There is thus a huge scope for investment for *kauna* plantation, production and marketing in the State. *Kauna* being environmental friendly and of very short lifecycle for plantation, represent an alternative source for all the handicrafts utility as well as artistic products. Incorporation of latest trends in ideas and fashion statement and designing and production techniques make these, all the more alluring for future expansion and major investment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this paper is to explore into the country's basic craft which is of great cultural, health and economic importance with the tradition of the Meitei community and a very important part of every house of the community, Cultivation and promotion of matting rush which have been taken up as a gainful economic activity, poverty alleviation and uplift the socio-economic condition of their family and enhance employment opportunity by the *Meitei* women artisans and entrepreneurs in the State Manipur due to having high market demands, commonly known as matting rush and *Kouna* locally by the Manipuris.

This research study is useful for analysis the major transformations in the art of Weaving as practiced by the women in Manipur from time

immemorial, bring it to the more acute economic activity helping in development of more women entrepreneurship in the state. Manipur produces a wide range of handicrafts and handloom items, decorative ivory, collectible dolls, bamboo and cane work are some of the many crafts of this state. In fact, the state is counted as one of the largest producer of bamboo crafts in India. Wood Carving, textile weaving, stone carving, block printing and hand-embroidery are other handicrafts of Manipur. This *Kauna* Crafts is another popular Manipur crafts and numerous craftswomen in Manipur are engaged in this particular *Kauna* Crafts in making a living by creating products and taking up self-employment ventures to supplement their family incomes, which are used for domestic use and export market in the country and outside.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This advance study is based upon the report about a person, group, or situation, this ethnographic study is highlighting and embracing the method of generalizing cases both case studies of individuals and organization, event and action existing in a specific time and place.

MATTING RUSH (*kouna*)

The official Collins English Dictionary online defined "rush mat" as a small piece of material made from rushes (plants of the genus *Juncus*), which is put on the ground or floor for protection, decoration, or comfort.⁸ The *Kouna* and its crafts is one of the oldest traditions in the Manipuri society. *Kouna*, Matting water rush or club-rush (*Schoenoplectus lacustris* (Linn.) Palla, syn. *Scirpus lacustris* Linn.), belonging to the family *Cyperaceae*, is a perennial, rooted aquatic plant commonly grown in the wetlands of the valley areas of Manipur. It is a unique eco-friendly plant and a species distinctively grown wild in the shallow lakes and marshy land, ponds, canals, along the river and lake beaches of Manipur Valley where paddy cultivation is not suited at all. The plant attains a height of 2.5m with numerous dark green, cylindrical, soft spongy, glabrous stems arising from an underground stalk with tough fibrous roots. Mat-making from rush is closely associated with the legendary divine snake god '*Pakhangba*' and thus the field where it grows is to be always kept free from filthy waste and waste products. It is believed that harvesting of the *Kouna* (plant) on Friday is avoided, with the belief that the plant will die or evil consequences will befall the harvester. Hence the plant is also called as 'Lady of Friday' ('*Irai -Leima*'). "*Kouna-phak*"⁹ is kept spread

⁸ collinsdictionary.com, Dated 30/03/2016

⁹ Floor mat made from matting rush is locally called as '*Kouna-phak*' in Manipur. Matting rush

⁷ Report collected from 'Invest in Manipur', investinmanipur.nic.in/handloom, 8th June 2013.

on the right portion of the verandah of every house of the Meitei community during daytime and rolled up at night. Besides, in every social or other gathering, the *Kouna-phak* is used to sit on being a part of culture. There is a belief that sitting on the floor mat or stool (*moora*) made of matting rush can cure piles.¹⁰

The *Kouna* plant thrives well in clay soil. It is generally propagated through slips. The most suitable period for cultivation is during the month of April and May with the arrival of the first monsoon showers. A water body or pond with a depth of 1 ft is most suitable for cultivation and deeper the water body is, the plant will be thicker and taller, which is not suitable for making good quality articles. After two years of transplantation, harvesting can be started and can continue up to 15 years. Regular weeding is necessary for healthy growth of the plant. The rush can be harvested every four months. Thus it can be harvested thrice in a year as:

- (i) Summer rush – harvested during May–June and locally called as ‘*Kalen-kouna*’,
- (ii) Autumn rush – harvested during September–October and locally called as ‘*Cheirak-kouna*’, and
- (iii) Winter rush – harvested during December–January and locally called as ‘*Ningtham-kouna*’.

Autumn rush is the most productive and durable and the best way to preserve the rush is to smoke it, which can be done inside a closed room with wood firing. The rush is sold in dry form in bundles of about 24" diameter. A bundle has about 350 tillers and costs about sixty rupees in the local market.¹¹ The *Kouna* craft has now been taken up as a gainful economic activity by artisans/entrepreneurs in some areas in the State due to having high market demands. The plants are planted especially for economic utilization in the marshy paddy fields, canals, along the submerged river and lake shores.

can be described as ‘golden water grass’ due to its multifarious uses and characteristics like being a bad conductor, sponginess, flexibility, resistance to pests and insects, moisture, etc.

¹⁰ Alka Jain, S. Roshnibala, K. Rajshree, H. Nandiram Sharma, P. B. Kanjilal and H. Birkumar Singh, Matting rush (*Schoenoplectus lacustris* (Linn.) Palla): Status, utility, threat, cultivation and conservation options in Manipur, Current Science, VOL. 89, NO. 6, 25 September 2005, p-1019

¹¹ Alka Jain, S. Roshnibala, K. Rajshree, H. Nandiram Sharma, P. B. Kanjilal and H. Birkumar Singh, Matting rush (*Schoenoplectus lacustris* (Linn.) Palla): Status, utility, threat, cultivation and conservation options in Manipur, Current science, VOL. 89, NO. 6, 25 September 2005, p-1021



Fig-3 Plantation of *Kouna* /water rush is done in large mass numbers in Shallow lakes and marshy land of the cutting valley where paddy cultivation is not suited at all. (*Khangabok Mayai leikai*, Thoubal district)

KOUNA CRAFT IN MANIPUR

Most of the matting rush is produced from *Thoubal* and *Bishnupur* districts of Manipur. The *Khangabok* and *Nongpok Sekmai* villages account for the largest share of production. '*Kouna*' grown in *Nongpok Sekmai* village is regarded as the best in Manipur. Cultivation of matting rush is a high income earning agro-practice. Cultivation and promotion of matting rush not only boost the economy and enhance employment opportunity, but also help in the conservation of wetlands. Manipur with its crafts venture and a vision of new technology of making handicraft products with these *kouna* plants is highly focused with due attention to the maximum exploitation of the plants. In the line of promotion of handloom and handicrafts of Manipur, *Thoubal, Khangabok Kouna* clusters; has taken up the extensive crafts training cum production with more than 150 production varieties with a mission to

poverty alleviation and uplift the socio-economic condition of the poor particularly the rural women artisans.

Earlier it is an unused plant grown wildly to marshy areas in Manipur, it is now cultivated in different parts of the state after discovering the dynamical usability and the *kouna* products are meant for local needs. Wood Carving, textile weaving, stone carving, block printing and hand-embroidery are other handicrafts of Manipur. *Kauna* Crafts is another popular Manipur crafts, which is liked and appreciated by many. Numerous craftswomen in Manipur and each one of the women in a house are engaged in *kouna* mat making job for their living. This job by craft in creating products is becoming one's self-employment ventures to supplement their family incomes, for domestic use and as a part of daily work.



Fig-4, Meetei women weaving Kouna phak- Reed Mats



Fig-5, various shapes of Kouna Mats



Fig-6, A woman doing her daily routine work of sun drying at her courtyard, scattering in heaps separately and according the number of days the the kouna is baked and dried up. (Khangabok Mayai leikai in Thoubal District and Kongjeng leikai, Imphal west District)



Fig-7 kouna are keep Roof top Smoke drying Kongjeng leikai, Imphal

Kouna mat is one necessary item which is considered closely associated with the cultural tradition of the *Meetei* community of Manipur. Each *Meetei* house owns $\frac{3}{4}$ *kouna* mat for daily customary uses. *Kouna* mat in *Meetei* language is *phak*. The *phak* is made by the *meetei* women for their own use as well as for other commercial purposes. Women in Manipur have taken up various self-employment ventures to supplement their family incomes. Many Women Self help groups in the state have come as a boon for unemployed women in Manipur who are now able to earn a living and support their families. And all the women workers are happy to be able to earn a decent living and are keen to impart training to other unemployed youth also. The *Kouna* plantation is carried out with fishery. The present *Kouna* plantation got more than six crops during the year and the quality of the *Kouna* crops is above average, and is quite successful in making various *Kouna* products.

AREA CHOOSE FOR THE STUDY

Of all these *kouna* concentrated areas Thoubal district occupies the bigger portion of the

Imphal valley. And *Khangabok* locality in Thoubal district is one of the most prominent areas where *kouna* mat/*phak* making is the most important source of livelihood for the people and more than 70% of the total population of the district is directly or indirectly depended on agricultural and *kouna* cultivation/plantation activities.

CONCLUSION

Mat /*phak* weaving is practiced mostly by women in the areas of Manipur. is practiced mostly by women in the areas of Manipur. These women weavers sustain themselves for their livelihood and micro-enterprise development in the state. They enjoy lot many by making variant cultural art and state's unique *kouna* crafts for use and sale. The most popular products are baskets, ladies hand bags, carriers, stools (*morah*), wine rack, storage racks, tableware, flower vases, finest jewelry boxes, pen/pencil stand, cushions and several other decorative and household items. Weavers use natural dyes to color the reed/*kouna* for their product. Different shapes and sizes of wooden blocks or moulds are use for making these structural products

using jigs, nails, fixtures, canes etc. and reed /*kouna* are woven around the mould to make different products. Above all these efforts still today the high quality craftsmanship of *kouna* matting needs recognition and appreciation, there are still gaps needing to build to uplift that community whose livelihood is depended on *kouna* making. And there are many women weavers in the state who really is taking up *kouna* weaving as main priority.