

## **Social context of Wancho designs : Towards an alternative paradigm**

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**Abstract :** Art and craft of tribal people attracted attention of anthropologist, historians, artists, art dealers, and others, centuries back. Aesthetics in weaving, woodcarving, colour and symbolism helped to search origins of creativity in multiple ways. Contribution of primitive art and crafts, towards the growth of knowledge of aesthetics, still is an urgent field of study to explore the inherent force for creativity. This paper won't attempt to explore the artistic endeavour in Wancho crafts and designs. Rather it intends to understand the nature of relationship between the art objects and society. Specifically, how social relationships are manifested in designs and work as decisive force to maintain social controls. Experiences of Wancho people are discussed here to understand the role of designs, colours, and beads in social relationships at a point of time. The question of independence in terms of creativity craft specialists and their rights over their creation are addressed. This paper also attempts to identify some cultural practices, which initiated social crisis among the Wanchos of Arunachal Pradesh.

*"Human affairs are too complicated ... it is a set of relationships from which predictions can be made but it is not the kind of thing that you call a theory in the sciences, where you have principles that aren't obvious (in fact, may even seem strange), but from which derive conclusions that can be tested in experimental situations. There is very little like that in the social sciences".* (Excerpts from an interview of Noam Chomsky, published in *frontline*, Vol. 18 (25) : 13, December 2001, Chennai, India.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Despite "aesthetic appeal (of Designs) transcends the barriers of time and culture" (Inomata 2001:321) symbolisms in art and handicrafts of tribal communities find different sets of expressions to different sets of people. It can broadly be categorized as outsider's expression and insider's expression. For the former group handicrafts of tribal communities were usually identified as art objects from previous century (Thomas & Hudson 1999, Jacob & ET. Al. 1998, Bridwood 1885), and attracted attentions of social scientists, artists, art historians, photographers, travelers, art dealers for aesthetics, gallants of beauties, colour combinations, designs, and for use of available materials of their surroundings. Community based productions of certain objects received status of

cottage industry in welfare state like india though potentialities of those materials to promote as an industrial commodity are not judged in terms of need of the region and market to transform it to big industrial items. One of the genuine reasons perhaps the technological backwardness, where concepts of large-scale production do not fit. Only in recent years a little attention is paid to promote indigenous knowledge system for sustainable development. Such situations obviously highlight traditional craftsmen. Here one of the important problems to be noticed that most of the times traditional manufacturers were referred as craftsmen in literature. When creative mind of individual(s) craftsmen in those societies remain invisible to outsiders behind the curtains of concepts of Craft specialists for cultural differences(!) or for differences in attitude(s).

At the outset I feel to share the particular background of present work, which I consider necessary for identifying my position in it. For last one year I have concentrated myself to understand women's contribution in their community in Arunachal Pradesh. For that, I was working among Wancho women to know their contribution apart from family farming systems. "The community occupies the western part beyond the Tisa River in the Tirap district. The main concentration of the Wancho population is in Longding, Kanubari, Ponchau and Wakka circles of the district. According to 1981 census the population size of the community was 32,441, spread over nearly 54 villages. The Wancho area is bounded on the north-west by the Sibsagar district of Assam, on the south and west by the Mon district of Nagaland, on the east by the Myanmar, and on the north by Khonsa sub-division of the Tirap district" (Ahmad 1995 : 400). When I was documenting endeavour of Wancho women in weaving as the first step of my work considering it as a manifestation of indigenous knowledge and creativity and was trying to understand meaning of designs and symbolic expressions in them faced some questions as follows : How much independent Wancho women are in their world of creativity? And what is the relationship between art objects and society? In fact, I noticed that cultural behaviours have close relationship with all aspects of creativity in Wancho society and so any deliberations could be remained incomplete if I do not discuss the gravity of social context of weaving, handicrafts and tattooing.

Datta (1975) is the pioneer to publish ethnographic work on this community. It is an out come of his twenty-five years research in this community. Srivastava (1967) was pioneer to Datta to work among the people of this community though he had concentrated on ethno-historical perspective of this community. Elwin (1988) for the first time mentioned about the designs of Wancho weaving at a length. In this book he discussed different art forms available in handicrafts in NEFA and Nagaland. Among others Ahmad (1995:400-405), Banerjee (1998: 19-26), Sarkar (1998) worked on Wancho.

### *Objectives*

1. This paper will examine the relationship of craftswomen with their crafts as well as between crafts and their users.







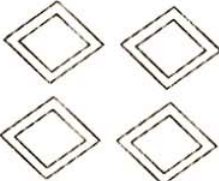
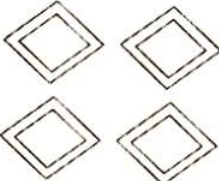
2. It will try to portrait culture specific meaning and symbolism in designs, which are woven on cloths, beadworks, and in tattooing.

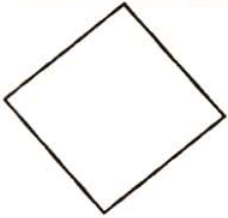

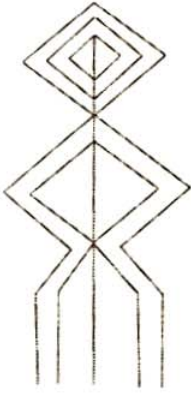

### **Designs and symbolism in Wancho handicrafts**

Designs of Wancho Weaving, beadworks, and tattoo follow a few motifs. These designs are 'Zigzag-Herringbone', and 'Parfleche' (please see Boas 1927:97; Weltfish 1953: plates XIX, LI & LII). Weltfish maintains that 'ZigZag-Herringbone' design was developed in the course of process of mat-weaving and 'parfleche' design evolved from the decoration of skin and bark bags. "Painted Parfleche designs carrying out the symbolism of the folding of stiff raw hide". Observations of Weltfish (1953) maintain that methods of folding rawhide to make Parfleche create some patterns. The whole characters of these designs based on the structure and shape of the Parfleche ultimately produced angular designs (Ibid: 138-139). A study of Ling Roth(1918) on various types of primitive looms through out the world says that setting of warp and weft in handlooms varies from one type of handloom to another and such variations influence designs and Weltfish opined that these designs were evolved in prehistoric period. The Parfleche design sometimes show it similarities with one of the geometric forms, that is the 'diamond' shape, which has closeness with the designs in basketry. These motifs of diamond and zigzag-herringbone are common in tattoo. Commonness of designs in all decorative arts of Wancho community a point to be noticed here. The local name of diamond

motif is *Atum* and different sizes of *Atums* are referred as *Tumnu*, *Tumsa*, and *Mittun* and considered as key cultural traits. None of my informants of Wancho women could tell the meaning of the words '*Tumnu*' and '*Tumsa*' except the meaning of the word '*Mittun*' *Mittkang*, that is 'dog eye'. The ZigZag-Herringbone design is referred as *Nuanu* or *Nuasa*, and straight line is *Lankhi Dangzem* (Source: As Mrs. Chama of Longding stated in December, 2001). A chart on common motifs in Wancho designs is given at below (Chart 1).

**WANCHO COMMON MOTIFS USED IN VARIOUS DECORATIVE DESIGNS**  
**Chart - I**

Motifs	Local name	English name	Use as design	Meaning	Source of information
	<i>Nuanu</i>	Zigzag Herringbone	On side bags, loin cloths of males and females basketbelts	Not found	
  	<i>Nuasa</i>	Zigzag Herringbone	On side bags, loin-cloth of males and females basketbelts, tattoo	Not found	
	<i>Dangzem</i> <i>Lankhi</i>		On side bags, loin-cloth of males and females basketbelts, tattoo	Not found	
 	<i>Mittkang</i> <i>Mittun</i>	Diamond	On side bags, loin cloths	Dogs eye	Mrs Chama Longding
	<i>Tumsa</i>	Diamond	On side bags, loin cloths	Not found	

Motifs	Local name	English name	Use as design	Meaning	Source of information
	<i>Tumnu</i>	Big Diamond	On side bags, loin-cloths, bead necklaces	Not found	
		Parfleche	On side bags	Not	
	<i>Khon oksa</i>	Anthropometrical form	Bead works Tattoo, coat	Human body	
	<i>Mitisa</i>	Doll	Bead works Tattoo, coat		

Source : Fieldwork done in the villages Senua, Zedua, in December of 2001-2002.

This chart is showing that use of various sizes of diamond and designs, which are similar to perfleche designs. Sizes of diamonds and anthropometrical forms are very important in Wancho social life. Symbolic meanings of these forms are discussed in the table I. It is well understood that Wancho weaving, which is developed by women confined in a few forms and designs. The women, who were almost self dependent in their production system as they collect cotton seeds from cultivable seeds, spin yarn, produce vegetable dye, can make lion-ooms, and weave cloths. Making attires of different sizes and shapes with colourful beads are entirely women's job, though it was told to me that usually men used to purchase beads from markets of Naharkatia, Margherita. One aspect to be noticed here that women hardly have any control over finished products, which are produced by them in the sense that they do not have freedom to present weaving products of any designs to anybody, that is who are near and dear to them. For example a Wangnu wife cannot present a bag with *Taumnu* design to her husband if he belongs to commoners' clan, and again this is a very common phenomenon in their society. Following tables manifest symbolic meanings of designs and their use as status symbol.

Table - 1

*Symbolic use of different forms of designs*

Use of different designs as symbols	Chief's class ( <i>Wangham</i> )	Commoner's class ( <i>Wangpan</i> )
<i>Nuanu and Tumnu</i>	Side bags, beadworks, of men and in tattoo on calf muscles of women.	
<i>Dangzem</i>		In tattoo on calf muscles of commoners' women
<i>Tumsa</i>		Side bags of men
Rich embroidered loin cloth with different colours and bead works	Festival dress of men	

Use of different designs as symbols	Chief's class (Wangham)	Commoner's class (Wangpan)
Medium size sky blue beads	Men at the joint of knee wear a string of blue beads. Women wear it at upper arm	
Wife or blue loin cloths without design		Worne by men
Likcham/Liksam of 20 or more lines		Worne by men
Waist band of of <i>Likvit</i> (white beads)		Worne by women as casual attire
Waist band with colourful small beads		By women during festival
<i>Lik nu</i> (big size beads)		Worne by men in necklace.

Source : Ibid.

This table clearly indicates that all bead attires, cloths, side-bags, are not made for every body. These are exclusively attached with class background and purely used as status symbols. Statuses of designs also vary. Some can be achieved but some are not. This is stated in the table 2.

Table - 2

*Reflection of Status in Designs*

Designs	Status Symbol of chief's class		Status symbol of commoner's class	
	Ascribed	Achieved	Ascribed	Achieved
<i>Nuanu and Tumnu</i>		In side-bags of men, in tattoo of women		

Designs	Status Symbol of chief's class		Status symbol of commoner's class	
	Ascribed	Achieved	Ascribed	Achieved
<i>Dangzem</i>			In tattoo of women	
<i>Tumsa</i>			In sidebags of men	
Rich embroidered lion cloth with different colour and bead works	Lioncloths of men			
Medium size sky blue beads	Attire for men in knee and women in fore arm			
White or blue loin cloths without design			For men	
<i>Likcham/Liksam</i> of 20 or more lines	For men			
Waist band of <i>Lik-vit</i> (white beads)	For women casual attire			
Waist band with colourful small beads	For women Festival attire			
<i>Lik nu</i> (big size beads)	For men			
Anthropometrical tattoo on chest and face		After head hunting	After head hunting	
Tatto on chest and shoulder and at naval area of women		After marriage	After marriage	

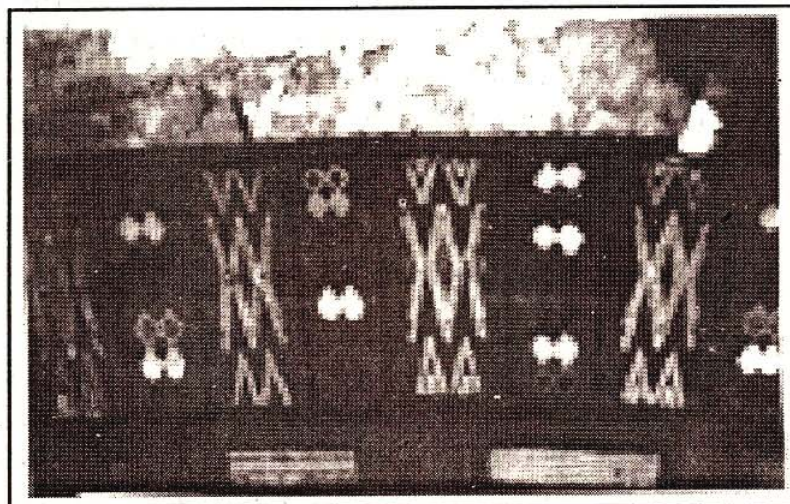
Source : Information of this table was collected during Fieldwork, organized in December 2001 and December 2002.



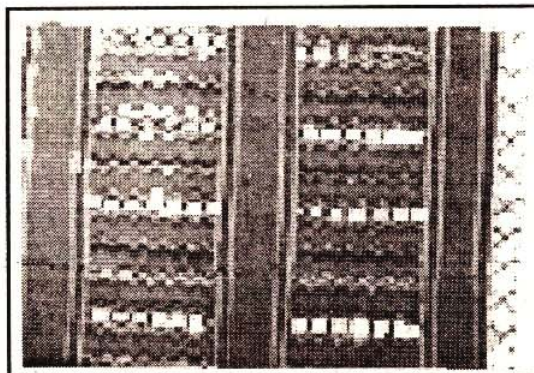
The festival garments of commoners' men are white or blue loincloth. Their lioncloths are devoid of any colourful decorations and less gorgeous bead attires. Men of chief family backgrounds are identifiable from their colourful, gorgeous loincloths and heavy bead attires. They use some special beads of sky blue colours at knee joints and necklaces of semi precious stones.

#### **ROLE OF DESIGNS, BEADWORKS IN SOCIAL ORGANISATION**

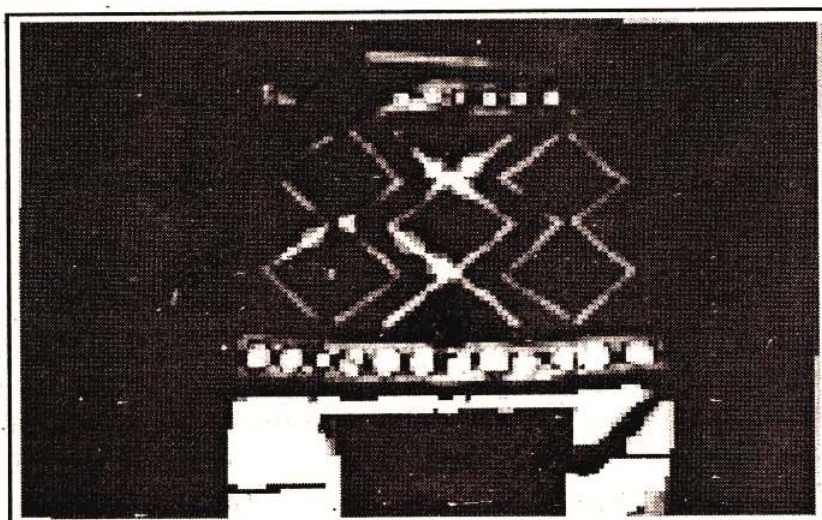
The symbolic meaning of designs are so strong in this community that those were not mere identity marker for the members of the same community earlier rather manifested ascribed and achieved status of the people within the community often on. The weavers in this community have multiple identities. They have a class identity apart from their gendered identity. Weaving is a gendered specific activity in this community. Like other communities of the region weaving entirely relies upon women. In this community usually women of chiefs; clan are referred as weaver. It does not mean that women belong to commoners' clan do not weave. Rather Wancho girls of both the sections learn it during their girlhood. In fact they learn to weave side bags and belt for special baskets in the beginning, which they present to would be husbands or boy friends. But they cannot continue it later on for their pre-occupations in cultivable works. Their counterparts in chiefs' clan are privileged by that way. Traditionally daughters of chiefs' clan did not participated in works of cultivation. So they got enough time to perform jobs of weaving. As a rule daughter-in-laws of Wangham (Chiefs') family backgrounds receive more honour to in laws house and generally assigned less arduous jobs. So they found time to do weaving regularly. In contrast Wangpan women get time for weaving after the child birth when they can not move to cultivable field leaving new born at home. Sometimes they go for collection of firewood. Aged women do spinning. Families belong to chiefs' clan are polygynous in nature. As a rule men of these families marry women from commoners' background but they have to marry again preferably from chiefs' background because son of Wangpan mother cannot inherit father's property. He can enjoy usufratary rights over land but it is a temporary phenomenon. They can cultivate father's land so far they do not purchase their own land that they supposed to do as early as possible. In such families women of commoners' background participate in all jobs



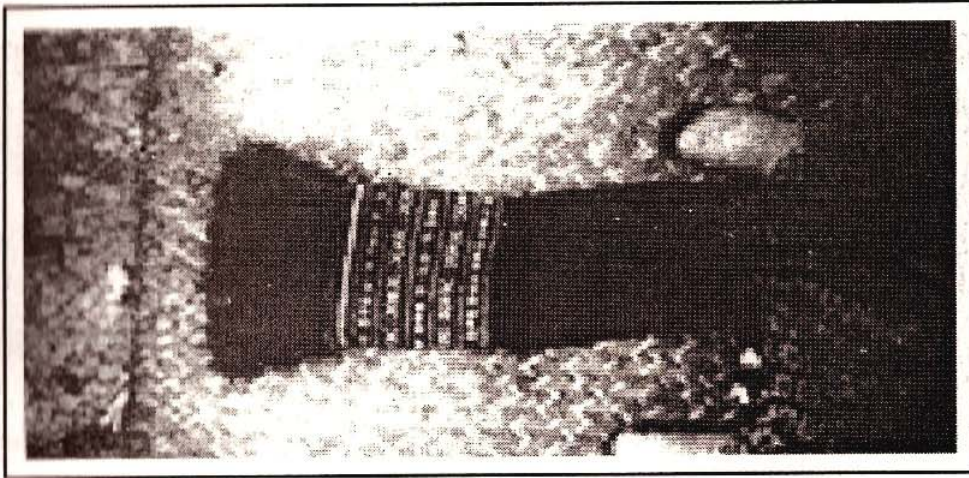
Parfleche



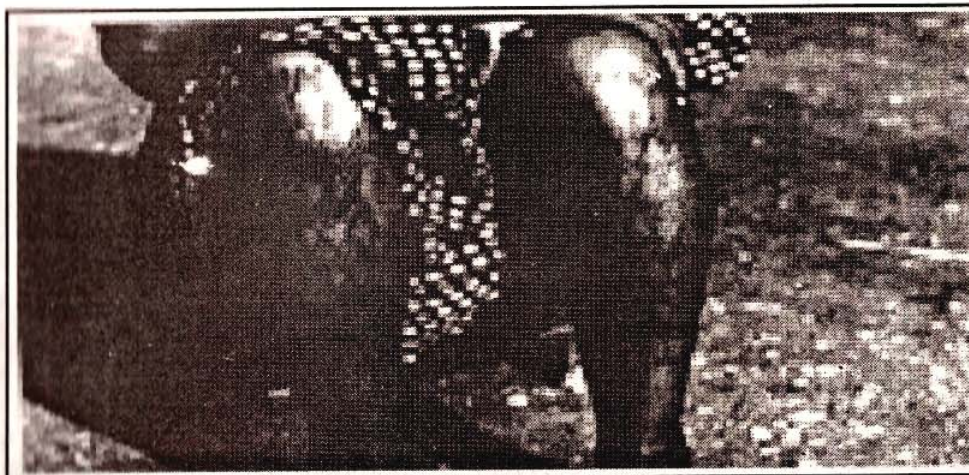
Tumsa



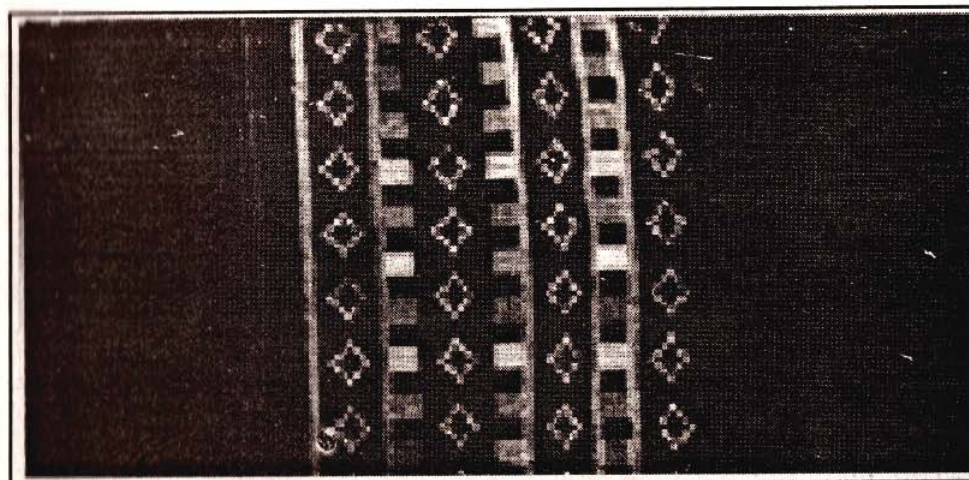
Tumnu



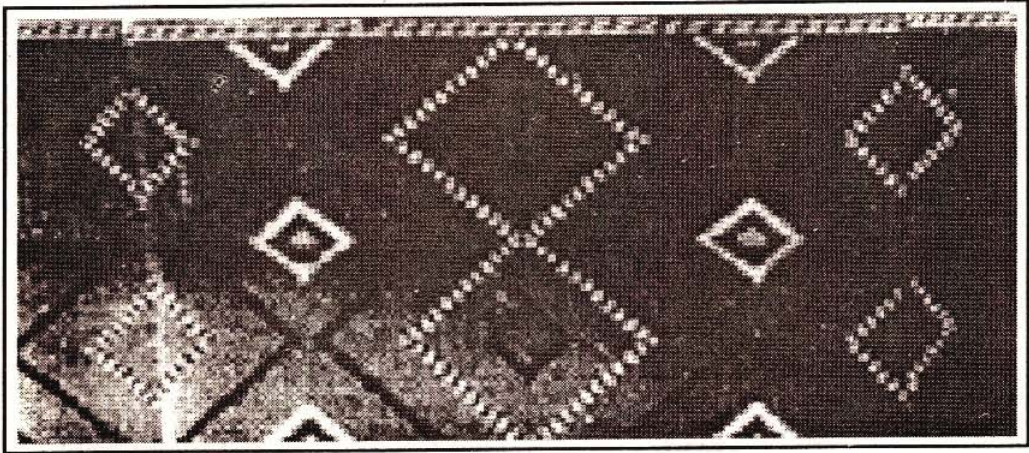
**Rich Embroidered Loincloth**



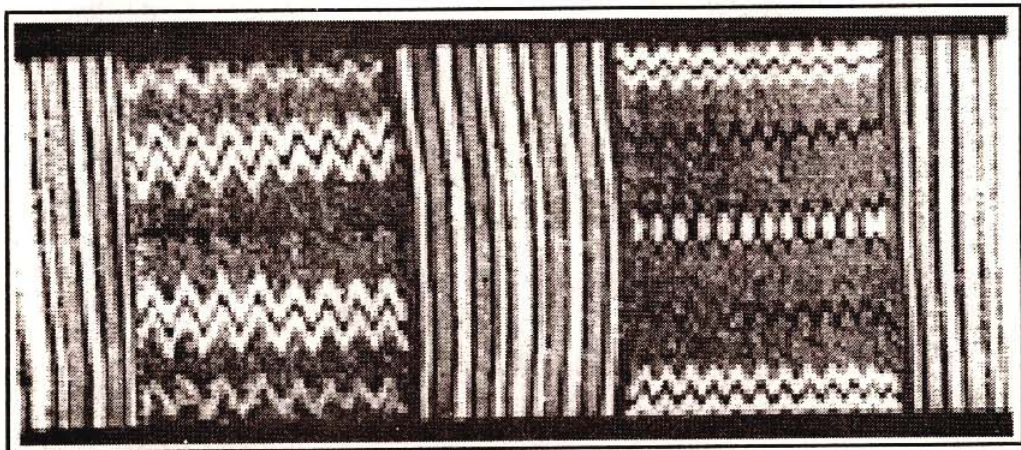
**ParflecheTattoo on legs of chief's daughter**



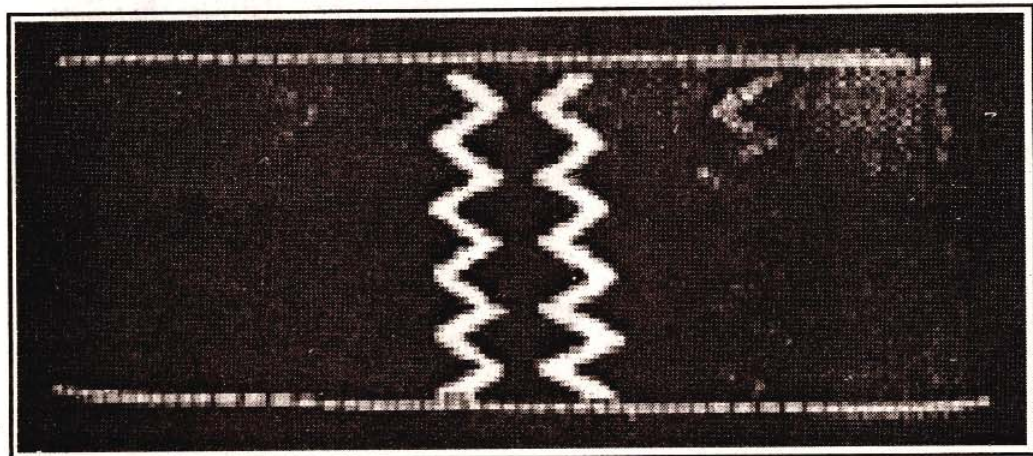
**Embroidered loincloth with bead works**



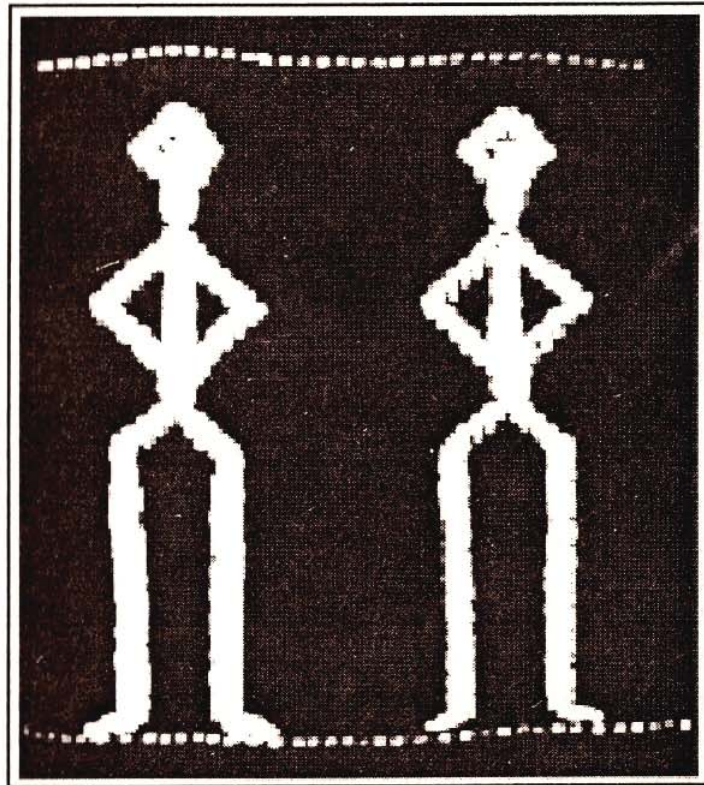
Tumnu



Nuasa and Lankhi



Nuanu



Khonoksa

of cultivation, and collection of firewood, water. Wancho customary laws consider families belong to chiefs' clans of a village as a single descent group and do not allow marriage within the unit. They are allowed to marry women of commoners' background from the same village and women of same class background from different villages. So women of commoners' background married to the person of chief's background and daughters of chief's clans get married to the person of commoner's background within village. Both the sections are women giver to each other within village. But as a rule clans of commoner's class of a village are exogamous in nature so members of these clans are again women giver to each other. Now question arise that whether daughters of commoners clan get married to chiefs' clan? Answer is 'yes'. Even twenty years back chieftaincy was so strong that commoners had hardly any power to decide their daughters' marriage according to their own choice. The Wancho boys and girls do not get married before observing rites of puberty. Violation of this rule culminated in the punishment of giving a good amount of fine of community feast. But engagements of marriages take place at an early age. Parents of

chiefs' families can select any number of girls from commoners' families for their son. The girl is booked for a particular boy once his parents express their desire to the parents of the girl. In such situation parents of girl cannot deny the request of others. A heavy fine is imposed on girl's parent if they show their resentment and the fine may be settled in plot of cultivable land or garden of *Toko* leaves (used to thatch roof). The present Gaon Bura of the village Senua was remembering that earlier such families of girls had to leave the village for ever if they were unwilling to such negotiations. Customary sanction to polygyny admitted these marriages easily. So in such a system commoners' daughters get married to chiefs' son and chiefs' daughters get married to commoners' son.

It is already discussed earlier that daughter of chief get more time for weaving as the system of polygyny replace helping hands for them to do jobs in cultivable field from commoners' family in the in laws house, who are co-wives by status. These cultural behaviours apparently identify daughters of chiefs' as privileged in comparison to others. Lets, see different levels and extension of their liberties. The weavers in a family weave for their son, husband, daughter, father, mother, grand children, and others. Can they weave according to their own choice? Can a Wangnu mother of Wangpan son weave a multi colour, loincloth for her son or, a necklace of many lines of beads? Certainly, the answer is 'no'. What will happen if the affectionate Wangnu mother weaves a side bag with *Tumnu* design for her Wangpan son or a beloved Wangnu wife weaves a bag of same design for her Wangpan husband? Let's see the faith of such incident that took place to Sompha Wangpan's stepfather. Sompha Wangpan is from the village Zedua, staying at Nahar Logun, Arunachal Pradesh and attached to a UNDP project at present. He is postgraduate and Christian by religion. Cent percent of the villagers of the village Zedua embraced Christianity though in the beginning they were critique of this. He narrated this incident to us when we were visiting his village. In fact he wasn't born when it happened to his stepfather. He heard this story from his family members.

*Once his stepfather, who was a priest went to attend a gathering within his village. He was carrying a side bag with him on which Tumnu designs were woven. Sompha's mother, who is a Wangnu (descendent of chief's family), had woven that bag. This behaviour of his father disappointed members of chiefs' clan as he was a commoner and so they*

*humiliated him. But they did not stop here but proceed furtehr to prove their resentment. At last they spoiled that bag so much that it cannot be used again.*

There is no doubt that this story left a bitter impression in Sompha's mind. But it surfaces another aspect that the producers of these crafts have a little hold over their production. They are a little independent in their creation. Designs of weaving, which they produce by their own are used by others to fulfill their desires. Weavers cannot express their emotions as mother, daughter, sister, and wife when they weave for son, father, brother and husband. Though they weave for family members but ultimately it does not remain as an affair within family rather the whole organization of weaving is controlled by the members other than weavers and obviously other than women despite the fact that the entire knowledge of producing yarn from bark, creeper and cotton seeds, vegetable dyes, and other necessary items required for weaving are developed, procured, and inherited by women from one generation to other. They do each and every aspect of production but have a little control over the distribution of production. Here the role of the producers cannot compare with the role of a labourer as they are family members and kin members.

Tatto motifs usually express achieved status. For men these marks indicate their contribution to the society in terms of bravery for women these are to indicate their adulthood, marriage engagement, pregnancy, motherhood. Earlier these tattoo marks monitor other behaviours of men and women at public places. As a rule opposite gender of other class background have joking relationships. Usually unmarried boys cut jokes to girls on the way to cultivable field and the later responded, or any other places they meet. But obviously they do not cut jokes in presence of elder members. They do not sing love songs in front of elders so during day times. Usually honourable young women of chiefly family background were exempted two. They say that women in their society enjoy more freedom than the women of many other so called 'modern community' nevertheless one may interpret such behaviours as the indicator of fairness. The jacket of kinship relationships of Wancho social organisation should not make others hesitant to comment on gender relationship, where concept of equality is a myth. Designs may be the most convenient source to understand these inherent unequal behaviours. It apparently

identifies women of chiefs' class as privileged in comparison to the women of commoners. But rights of inheritance of properties indicate the depths of inequality prevail in gender relations.

Recently Wancho Student Union impose a ban on tattooing and women prefer this decision. As a result girls and teenager of today do not go for elaborate tattoo on different parts of their body in the different stages of life. Now questions arise did they stop it to gratify members of students' union or it is discontinued for its painful discourse. It could be a difficult attempt for an outsider to remark on it but disappearance of tattoo on women body is the pointer of a phenomenon that says that Wancho women gradually de-touched from their cultural behaviours. Here, I could safely end up identifying some effects of modernization, education, and religious conversion in such shifting behaviours. Sometimes it could be more convenient if alien factors were directly identified as responsible to initiate social change. When it is observed that differential designs on body (tattoo), cloths, bags and bead works were not remain as markers of domination but received some alternative meaning in recent past. A section of Wancho women got a alternative meaning in recent past. A section of Wancho women got an alternative social space within their own community and could be able to weave designs for which they wanted to weave. This social space at least ensured some courage and reorganizes some social behaviours for better life living. At least a section of people can deny choices of chiefs and they are not fined for such behaviours. At least they can save their daughters and sisters from curse of polygyny and debate for their financial securities.

#### CONCLUSION

Aesthetics in handicrafts may over shadow deep-rooted meanings as it is found in Wancho designs. Here use of a few decorative designs to manifest social stratification cannot be referred as identity marker in the traditional situation so far. The controlling mechanisms on the domain of innovative activities of craft-persons identified a new relationship between men and women, where one gender (that is women) appeared as producer and another gender (that is men of chiefs' class) enjoy the monopoly



of allocation of those productions and the whole mechanism is regulated by kinship relationships. The emergence of craft specialists and the question of independence in creation are subject to kinship identity for them. Appearance of artisan's class is several century old phenomena. Caste factors imposed many limitations in life of artisans, which is understandable from the status of artisan castes in India however reality says that within that fold of identity weavers have shown excellence in creation. Perhaps, they could enjoy more freedoms due to contact with market. Craft is developed as household industry. The families belong to same caste performed same occupation sustained through guild. Bhattacharya and Chakrabarti (2000) referred the finding of 1961 census of 150 artisan communities. They expressed that traditional arts and crafts worked as a necessary linkage to the predominant mode of agricultural production. But in the context of the Wancho no similar development is traceable. The historical background of such relationship may unveil reasons behind emergence of such dealings. Although need of the hour is to address such position of crafts women where despite of knowledge on whole production system those innovator remain unnoticed behind the curtain of the customary laws.

**Note :** This paper is an outcome of the on going project on Wancho weaving sponsored by Arunachal University under the UGC minor research grant.

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