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RESEARCH ARTICLE

READING NAGA TRADITIONAL ATTIRES FROM A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE.

Dr. Temjensosang.

Assistant professor. Department of Sociology, Nagaland University; Hqrs; Lumami. Pin Code-798627.
 Zunheboto, Nagaland-India.

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Abstract

The Naga traditional attires carries full of symbolic meanings this is to state that in traditional time one's attires and ornaments was used to mark its identity. The entire concept of attires is centered on the principle of feast of merit and head hunting therefore the stratification of Naga society is based on these two. A dress for most human society is to cover its body, though it has its adornment, however for a Naga it is the social distinction of one clan from the other and most importantly attires signifies the status and position of the wearer therefore attires are an identity marker. Each pattern and motifs inscribed in the shawls represent a semiotic meaning of the wearer. Tattooing forms an integral aspect of Naga culture and set a benchmark in the social stratification. The use of hornbill feather signifies of being leader and symbolizes of high status. What is significant in this study is the use of objects such as animals, birds, human heads and many more all these carry sociological as well as semiotic meaning. Therefore attires are not just for covering the body but reveal the wearer's identity in the context of naga culture.

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Introduction:-

The present study needs to clarify two concepts before we proceed any further in our discourse these are, 'Semiotic' and 'Attires'. Semiotic is a science of signs therefore the study of different signs in a cultural society can be called as Semiotic. Attire is defined as piece of cloth used for body adornment. Therefore, any clothing used by a cultural society for its body adornment, and whereas the ideas and values of the cloths are largely being shared by the members of the society, can be called as attires. Indeed, the earliest used of semiotic can be trace to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. To him Semiotics refers to a closed-system, a historical structure approach to signs. The sign is a function of signifier and signified joined as a mental construct thus meaning comes from construct. Social Psychologist G.H Mead introduced a widely used symbolic framework. Mead asks how does a sign (a symbol become significant)? He imagined a little scenario in which people gestured, indicated objects which in turn were suffused with meaning and action potential, and thus created a dialogue between the I, present action, the Me, reflection on action, and the (significant and generalized) other [1].

The most systematic approaches to semantics relevant to ethnographic work emerged in the 1960 developed by the anthropologists influenced by biological taxonomies, cognitive psychology and mathematics. This works shows how they organized key domain in culture, such as color, kinship and ethno-botanical categories. Later work systematized native notion of mental illness, weddings, firewood, lesions and law, and map taxonomy yielding

Corresponding Author:- Temjensosang.

Address:- Assistant professor. Department of Sociology, Nagaland University; Hqrs; Lumami. Pin Code-798627. Zunheboto, Nagaland-India.

western, linear, hierarchal, exclusive, Aristotelian classification. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. It not involves the study of signs in everyday speech but of anything which stands for something else. In semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects [2]. Thus Katgryn Sullivan Kruger explains in her article 'weaving the word', the relationship between texts and textiles is, historically a significant one. Anthropologists have long been intrigued at the various ways in which cloth embodies the unique ideas of a culture. They can trace the history of a culture through the record of its textiles, "reading" cloth like a written text. Indeed, this cloth transmits information about the society which created it in a manner not dissimilar from a written language, except in this case the semiotics of the cloth depends on choice of fiber, pattern, dye, as well as its methods of production [3].

In all civilizations, dress is worn for warmth, protection modesty (to enhance the appearance of the wearer), and to proclaim his place in society, including rank, occupation, age, sex, place of origin, marital status, and religion [4]. For instance, about 4,000 years ago in the warm Indus valley, an assured little dancing girl from Harappa felt well-dressed wearing only bracelets, knowingly massed, a necklace, and well coiffed hair.

Elizabeth Wilson states: In all societies the body is 'dressed' and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles. 'Dress is always unspeakably meaningful'. The earliest forms of clothing seem to have been adornments such as body painting, ornaments, scarifications (scarring) tolling mask, and often constricting neck and waist bands. Many of these deformed, reformed or otherwise modified the body [5].

Clothing is a significant factor in human development. Clothes are a way of showing social status, religious beliefs and artistic aspirations. They are often an easily identifiable and fiercely treasured cultural heritage. Prof Galinsky [6] said, Clothes invade the body and brain, putting the wearer into a different psychological state. Clothing affects how other people perceive us as well as how we think about ourselves. Clothing has become a symbol of an individual's identity. It represents and expresses the style of a person. "It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals."

Having clarified the conceptual clarity of 'Semiotic' and 'Attires' it is now relevant to introduce in brief who are Nagas? Well, Nagas are a mongoloid race who speaks Tibeto-Burman languages and is currently spread across in many Indian states and even in Myanmar (Burma). However, the instant study is concentrated among the Nagas of Nagaland. Well, Nagaland is the 16th state in the Indian union. It attained statehood on the 1st December 1963. Nagaland is situated in the northeastern region of India currently having a population of about 2 million i.e. (1,980,602) with having a literacy rate of 80.11 % which is above the national rate of 74.04% [7] and is scattered over 11 administrative districts. The state is inhabited by 16 major tribes and a host of sub-tribes. People of Nagaland claim themselves to be a family of same cultural community hence same origins, and belonging to mongoloid race. However, certain innate features or cultural elements mark each of them in a distinct character from the others in terms of customs, language and attires.

Rationale of the Study:-

Nagas have a rich heritage of cultural symbols and meanings which are inscribed in the shawl, rich man's house, or the village gate in the form of various objects such as, animals, planetary objects, birds etc. In shawl various pattern and symbols are designed such as elephants, tigers, lion, human head, to name a few, besides motifs, criss-cross patterns etc. Tattooing is also an aspect of Naga culture which is limited to brave man for Konyak and Chang tribe whereas among the Ao tribe it was only woman to tattoo. In fact, a woman was not ready for marriage unless she gets tattooed on her face and body. However, not many documentary works on the said subject are available, especially studies related to the Semiotic relevance or interpretation of cultural symbols into socially relevant meanings. It may be stated that, among the Naga tribes, traditionally, the highest social honor and prestige was accorded to a man who performed the feast of merit. Performing such merit of feast has a long chain of taboo to observe and the process is year long. On completion of all formalities and on successful completion of the final feast one is socially recognized to wear an ornamental shawl which was woven of many patterns and symbols. A person not performing such feast of merit was not qualified to use that particular shawl. The greater questions underlying in this study is that, today the younger generation has lost a sense of understanding such painstaking culture and its values thereby failing to appreciate its traditional art, the rich heritage of the Nagas. It is relevant to note here about an Ao Naga legend, *Nagas once had their own script which was written in an animal's skin, unfortunately that scripts was eaten by a dog hence lost their script* [8]. It may be stated Nagas have no script of their own unlike many civilized societies therefore no documentation of their history. Despite of this, Naga cultures are rich in signs

and symbols which have attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers.

Major Discussion and Findings:-

Each Naga tribes have varieties of colourful traditional attires belonging to different clans and sub clans. Different way of dressing patterns differentiate between the poor and the rich. Therefore, a Chang Naga woman wearing the necklace below her navel is normally understood to have been from a rich family while for those who wears above her navel was an indication of being from a poor family. It is sufficient to mention that in the past people's rank and status could be easily distinguished from their dresses they wear. A poor man's attires are simple; his shawls are without any designs where as a rich man's attire is complex and his shawls woven with different patterns and motifs inserting various objects and signs and also colourful. While dwelling on this discussion a further relevant question arises as to who maintained the propriety of who should wear what? And what was the course of penalty in case of violation? Since people lived in small village community everyone knows who is who therefore the question of moral infringement towards propriety in dressing was either very minimum or even do not exist at all. Unlike modern society, parental role in educating their children was very minimum however the institution of *tsüki* [9] and *Arju* [10] was strong enough that everyone learns the social etiquettes, moral responsibility, and norms and values of the community. This is to say that society itself was vigilant in moral policing. Naga society is based on clan system therefore in the case of women, and especially with Ao women's mekhala (sarong), the daughters cannot share the same patterns and motifs with her mother's mekhala. This is true because Naga society is a patrilineal and follows the principal of exogamy thereby children take the father's title. It must be mentioned here that while discussing about Naga attires the whole concept revolves around two principle i.e, a giver of feast of merit or a warrior. Nagas traditionally practiced the culture of giving feast to the community he lived. The practice includes serial of sacrifices, rituals and taboo where husband and wife abstained from each other till the entire ritual is over which would last more than one years. The feast of merit ends with pulling of monolith stone by the community members as a mark to confer the social honour to the host among the Chakhesang Nagas. While keeping of monolith was not much prevalent among the Aos, Chang and Konyak tribes. The distinctiveness of the act of feast of merit was the earning of a social honour and prestige through a significant shawl with patterns and motifs. In that the ornamental shawl was exclusively meant for the giver of feast of merit. The object inscribed in the shawl such as Mithun, Hornbill birds, the planetary objects all marked as a symbol of high status achieved in society through its riches. The Ao tribe has this shawl *Azü jangnupsü*, it is a shawl mostly of red and black stripes with a yellow in the black stripes. The poor may have only one design woven into each of the two breadths. The wife and daughters of a rich man may have three or four designs woven into each of the two breadths. Infact the most coveted shawls among the Ao tribe are *Tapensa sü*, *Takar sü* and *Rongsu sü*. A shawl with cowrie is one which signifies a sign of marital achievement, while the fringes signify the riches and popularity of the wearer among the Konyak. A shawl called *Nyaunyi* is worn by the rich Konyaks. This is a combination of red bands and black lines. Whereas, the most common warrior shawl of the Chakhesang tribe is called the *Khonoma* shawl. The shawl has spear motif which signifies bravery in the war. The *Mozaluo* shawl is also a Chakhesang warrior shawl. It has spear as well as a motif similar to a flesh woven to the shawl.

Naga shawls are also reserved for head hunter these are earned through its bravery. Normally, head as trophy was obtained while on a prey or on a village raid. To see the act of head hunting from the humanitarian perspective was something unimaginable. However, it must be noted that village raids were never conducted without any reason. It is sufficient to mention that Nagas adorned themselves with ornamental shawls especially for feast giver and head hunters. What only need to clarify here is about the different patterns of shawls they wear. For instance, The Ao *tsüngkotep sü* is known as a warrior shawl. The shawl is depicted with the pictures of planetary objects like sun, moon and star the symbols of animals like lion, tiger, etc and also birds like hornbill and many more objects which carries significant meaning that are used normally as metaphorical in the social usage of language. *Shangbu nei* is a warrior shawl worn by the Chang tribe who had taken its enemy's head as trophy. It must also be mentioned here that, a weaver while weaving this clothes is strictly prohibited to eat or drink from other's house till she finishes the shawls. A shawl called *Moh nei* or cowrie shawl could be worn only by a man who has taken six or more heads. These all shows that Naga shawls are not just piece of cloths to keep their body warmth but it is a medium through which a person reveals its status and position.

A significant aspect of Naga culture is also the use of hornbill feather. The hornbill feathers indicate high status achieved through the feast of merit or as a head hunter. For example an Angami warrior decorates his headdress with the hornbill feathers according to the number of heads taken. Konyak warriors put two feathers in his headdress to show his warrior status. While in the context of Aos, feast giver adds one feather each time the couple perform the

feast of merit. The philosophical significance of hornbill bird in the context of Naga culture is that, hornbill bird is the leader or king of all birds therefore Nagas used of this feather is to represent as leader or king like person in his community because of his achievement in bravery or riches.

A relevant question is generally raised often as to who enjoys higher status between the feast giver and the head taker in society? It was always the head taker who has the highest social standing. The reason being, the head takers rendered his service in protecting the village and the community while the feast giver works for his own riches. Thus, this marks the social distinction between the elites of the community among the Naga tribes in general.

A Semiotic analysis of Naga culture:-

Tattooing as a cultural rhetoric:-

Tattooing and ear piercing, was only acceptable in the Western Culture among subculture groups like sailors, prisoners, bikers, and mobsters for centuries. According to the Progression of the Tattoo, tattoos are now considered a "unique decoration" in the world of body art because they stay with the person forever. Many people find this idea appealing, and seek to tattoo on themselves to convey a message that will never leave them. This idea of non verbal expression through body art began to be more popular in the mainstream culture of today's Generation whether in America or West. The cultural rhetoric of tattooing in this sense can be seen as a divergence from the main culture. Tattooing, like body piercing can therefore be seen as liberation from the mainstream culture in America and in the West. Today, celebrities, Iconic personality in popular culture or even a common man in the street are seen not without a tattoo is a sign of their conformity to modern culture. Nagas who have tattooed on their face and on their body before the arrival of Christianity was a non verbal cultural expression about their being a chief of the village, a warrior, or even a sign of attainment of womanhood. Sociologically speaking, people who tattooed on their body were not the victim of fashion but an active member of society who responded according to the social and cultural values. Tattoos and body piercing works alongside the brands and styles of clothes one chooses to wear to create a rhetorical statement about the kind of person one is. In that sense, if clothing makes up the "sentences" in the grammar of fashion, than surely it can be argued that tattoos and body piercing are the "punctuation" in those sentences. Tattooing can therefore be considered as encoding of a cultural value of a sub culture in the larger cultural scenario.

Fashion vis-à-vis Semiotic:-

Semiotics assumes that visual images and their respective signs can be read similar to a text. Fashion and body adornment not only have a language of their own, but can be read as an explanation and text of one's personality and character. Cultural semiotics is an important part of visual rhetoric because it allows us to take simple signs and codes and turn them into an actual conversation. Often studying visual rhetoric includes studying compositions, art, advertisement, film, and many other objects created. Not only can the things created around us be analyzed in regards to their visual rhetoric, but the things in themselves, and the way they are presented can also present a coded and signified message. Each person has a unique personality, set of beliefs, opinions, and in order to convey that identity we use our body as a canvas to project that identity. Elizabeth Wilson States In all societies the body is 'dressed' and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles. Dress is always 'unspeakably meaningful.' The earliest forms of 'clothing' seem to have been adornments such as body painting, ornaments, scarifications (scarring), tattooing, masks and often constricting neck and waist bands. Many of these deformed, reformed or otherwise modified the body. The rhetoric of a person, and their appearance, can include many factors. One can represent themselves with their clothes in many ways, with jewellery, adorning themselves with symbols, hairstyles as well as many other rhetorical items. This act of representing, and presenting ones rhetoric through clothes, or other body adornment is called self-fashioning.

Encoding:-

Not only can particular styles of clothes define a person as an individual, but also as a part of a group. The entire dress code and the material object that Nagas have used are therefore within our own culture domain that effectively communicates a specific notion of identity through specific rhetorical cue, an example is the use of hornbill feather. The philosophical interpretation of hornbill bird in the context of Naga culture is such that Hornbill bird is seen as a leader or king of all birds therefore using its feather symbolizes as leader or king in their community.

Clothing as a Form of Non-Verbal Communication:-

It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals, claims human behaviorist Desmond Morris. Even choosing not to wear clothes also sends out a message. Therefore, the decision each individual makes about his or

her appearance through clothing sends the viewer a message. This includes people who claim they pay no attention to their clothing with regard to its communicative value equally sends out message about his/her attitude. This is quite true while attempting to understand the semiological meaning of clothing.

Cultural Applications of Fashion Semiotics:-

One common definition of culture is described as the values, norms, institutions and artifacts that are passed on from one generation to another by learning alone. for instance, no amount of dividing and categorizing can mitigate the deep and rich cultural milieus cultivated in the minds of American the 'American blue jean' , 'a perfect pair of blue jeans'. These metaphors are widely shared in the American culture and are so deeply internalized even in their consciousness.

The analysis of blue jean culture in America is an example to comparatively understand in the Naga cultural context. The analogy in the context of Nagas culture is that, the impact of Christianity, Westernization and Globalization is very enormous. Much of the dressing styles resembles like the American or Westerners in any normal day. However, the point of divergence is on a tribal event or even a Hoho gathering, or any other civil society gathering, people's way of dressing reflects a print of tribal motifs which actually exhibits of their deep inculcation of cultural values. This indeed is the cultural application of fashion semiotics.

Endnotes:-

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7. Census of India 2011:3 Government of India.
8. A Naga legend story which expresses about the lost of Naga script. Nagas scripts were once written on a piece of animal skin however it was believed to have been eaten by a dog.
9. Girl's dormitory, Nagas have the practice where adult girls would sleep in one of their clan widow's house.
10. Boy's dormitory, Nagas have the practice where adult boys used to sleep in a dormitory, to keep the village protected from the attack of enemy.