

Traditional Textiles of the Lusei Tribe of Mizoram

Lisa Lalmuankimi Pachuau,
Ritu Mathur and
Kiran Kapoor

Introduction

Mizoram is nestled in the picturesque and gentle hill folds and is the southernmost tip of the north eastern states. It protrudes downwards between Myanmar and Bangladesh. It became the 23rd state of the Indian Union on 20th February 1987 (Anonymous, 2009). The majority of Mizoram's population consists of several ethnic tribes who share close physical similarities and are known as the Mizo. In Mizo language, Mi means person, Zo means hills and Ram stands for land or country. Therefore, Mizoram means the land of the Mizo, the hill people. The ancestors of the Mizo were believed to be of the Mongolian race, who migrated from China through Myanmar and settled in the present Mizoram around 1700 AD. The Mizo are divided into numerous tribes. The major tribes of the Mizo include Lusei, Lai, Hmar, Ralte, Paite, Mara and a few others (Dokhuma, 2008). Of the numerous tribes comprising the Mizo, the Lusei were the most prominent and their chiefs were considered to be very powerful in earlier times (Sangkima, 2004). Some of the authors have mentioned Lusei as 'Lushai' or 'Lushei'. However, Lusei is the most widely accepted terminology.

Since time immemorial, handloom and handicrafts have been the two most important art forms in the Mizo culture. The use of bright and striking colours, as well as varieties of geometric patterns, made the textiles quite distinctive (Doshi, 1992). Earlier weaving was considered solely women's responsibility. Young Mizo girls learnt weaving at a very young age. Every family was supposed to be self-reliant. In their spare time, Mizo women would take out their looms and weave their own cloths and blankets.

The traditional textiles were woven on a loin-loom also known as 'back-strap tension loom', locally known as *puanbû*. The warp was bound over a fixed beam of wood or bamboo, on the loom and the other end was tautened by the weaver wearing, round the hollow of her back, a leather strap which was attached to the other end of the loom. The weaver sat between this leather and the loom, adjusting her position to suit the warp length. The weft was passed through the warp and was battened firmly down by the use of a smooth and comparatively weighty, blade of polished wood, usually of sago palm (Call, 2003). Traditionally, since weaving was done on loin looms, only fabric of limited width could be woven. In order to get broader fabric, two pieces of cloth were sewn together along the length. The broader fabrics were used as wrap around. However, at times, men also used bigger pieces of cloth as an outer garment. In such cases, three pieces were stitched together. However, with the development of shuttle looms and fly – shuttle looms, cloths of bigger widths could be woven.

The cloth they wove was called *puan*. *Puan* was a generic name given to any piece of cloth. When a cloth was used as a wrap around, the wrap around was also referred to as a *puan*. *Puan* was of many types and it could be either used as lower or outer garments. Both men and women could use it. When a woman used *puan* as a wrap around, it was called *puanbih* while in case of a man it was called *puanveng* (Plate-I,A). In most of the cases, *puan* was worn in such a way that the cloth was taken around the

waist, from the backside of the wearer and one corner of it was tucked-in securely at the side of the waist. The fringe of the *puan* would fall along the side of the wearer. *Puan* was also used in such a way that one end of it was used for covering their shoulders and the other end was held under their arms (Plate-I,B). This style of wearing *puan* was in fashion for quite some time.

Puan played a prominent role in the life of the Mizo since earlier period to the present times. It could be used in different ways. It was a traditional practise that when a girl got married, she had to carry a certain numbers of *puans* as a marriage gift for her in-laws. These *puan*staken as marriage gift were called *puanchhawm*. When a person died, his close relatives would bring *puan*. This was called *mitthikhuhnapuan* (*puan*used for covering the dead body) and it could be any kind of *puan*. This traditional practise prevails even today. The *puan* used by the Lusei tribe have been categorized into unisex costumes, men`s costumes and women`s costumes.



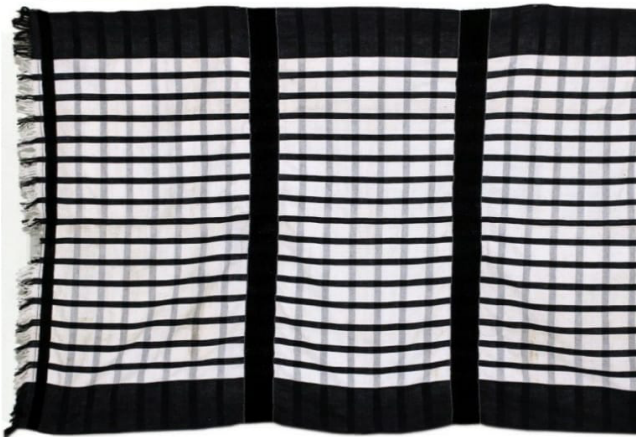
Styles of using *Puan*:
*Puan*as lower
Garment



Styles of using *Puan*: *Puan*
as outer garment
Photo Courtesy: Author

Unisex Costumes

- i. ***Puango***: It was the first textile used by the Lusei tribe. *Ngo* literally means fair or white in Mizo language. Therefore, *puango* means a simple white cloth without motif. It was also called *puanmawl* (*mawl* in Mizo language means simple). It was a casual attire and was woven out of locally grown, hand spun cotton, and *malkalh* (plain weave) was used for weaving the textile.
- ii. ***Ngotekherh***: This traditional textile was still very well known by the Lusei tribe. *Kherh* in Mizo language means to twist and *ngote/ ngo* means fair or white (Plate-II,A). It was also called *hruihpuan* or *puanhruih* because the two vertical stripes on the cloth were woven in *hruih* i.e. rib weave. *Ngotekherh* was black and white in colour, and from a distance, the *puan* looked like a checked fabric. The two broad vertical stripes were woven perpendicular to the selvedge, which divided the *puan* into three equal parts. It was initially more of Lusei men`s lower garment. However, with time, it became more of women`s lower garment. In earlier days, *ngotekherh* were used on *kũtnivãngthla* (the time of the celebrating of a public feast or festival).



Unisex Costumes: *Ngotekherh*
Photo Courtesy: Author



Unisex Costumes: *Pawndum*
Photo Courtesy: Author



Unisex Costumes: *Puanrin*, Photo Courtesy: Author

- iii. **Pawndum/puandum:** *Pawndum* has a deep cultural significance among the Lusei. It was also known as *zawlpuan*, *zawlpuandum* or *zawlkenpuan*. Originally, it was made in stripes of black and red (Plate-II,B). However, with time as there was easy availability of different synthetic colours, the Lusei women started using these dyes to enhance their textiles. Thus, the traditional textile transformed from a black and red striped fabric to one with multi-coloured stripes of varying thicknesses. *Pawndum* was a *puan* that a bride brought for her husband at the time of marriage. In earlier times, if this gift was not given, a reduction was made in the marriage price by as much as *tlaisial* (a domesticated *mithun* of the size valued to twenty rupees in olden days). Since women were taught weaving at a very young age, they wove *pawndum* for their husband as a marriage gift. It is still a compulsory marriage gift among the Lusei's and by custom, a wife has to cover her husband's dead body with this *puan* if her husband died during her lifespan. The performers of *Khuallâm* (name of a traditional dance) also used *pawndum*.
- iv. **Puanrin:** *Rin* in Mizo language means to make/ draw line(s). Thus, *puanrin* stands for a textile on which lines/ stripes were woven (Plate-II,C). It was used as a shawl/ outer covering. Therefore, it was bigger than other textiles, which were used as wrap around. This textile had thin lines, which were woven perpendicular to the selvedge with a white broader stripe at the centre dividing the *puan* into two equal halves. The main characteristic feature of this *puan* was the thin lines woven perpendicular to the selvedge. These lines were woven in white yarns on a dark background.
- v. Only well-to-do families could afford this textile. In earlier days, it was used on *Chai* (name of a traditional dance) during *kûtnivângthla*. However, the Lusei had stopped using *puanrin* for a very long time.

Men's Costume

The Lusei men also used *puan* as lower and outer garments.

- i. **Hrenpereng:** A small width loincloth called *hrênpereng*, was used while working. It was not a long piece, however, it was just enough to cover their private parts. *Hrenpereng* was the first woven lower garment used by Lusei men.
- ii. **Tawlhlohpuan:** *Tawlhloh* in Mizo language means to stand firm or not to move backward. Thus, *tawlhlohpuan* was an indication of never turning back attitude of a notable knight. In earlier times, if a village had a high number of knights who were courageous enough to use this *puan* as an outer covering, the Chief and the villagers were comforted and were at peace knowing that they have men who would fight to save their village. The main characteristic feature of this *puan* was the narrow stripes perpendicular to the selvedge woven in white and red. Thin stripes of yellow were used to line the outer red stripes. In recent times, The textile had been modified by decreasing the size of the *puan* and Lusei women had started using it as a wrap around.



Men's Costume: Tawlhlohpuan,
Photo Courtesy: Author



Men's Costume: Thangchhuahpuan
Photo Courtesy: Author

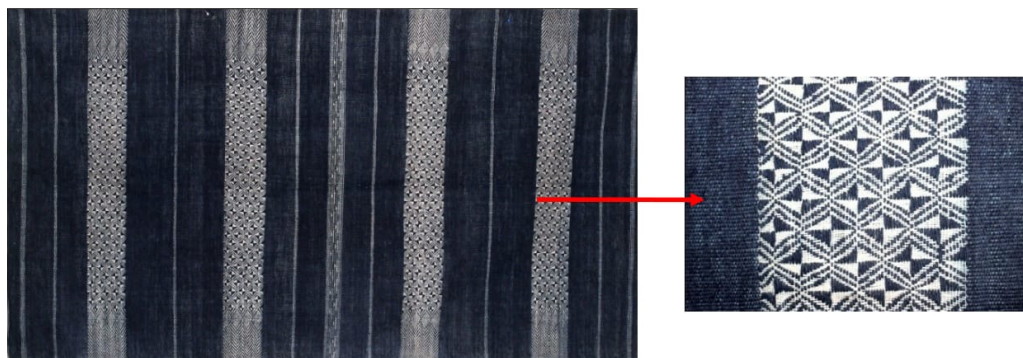
Woman's Costume

Lusei women's costume was more colourful than the men's costume. They used straight pieces of *puan* worn as wrap around. All the lower garments were unstitched. The skirts were locally called *fenphel*. They were wrapped around the waist and the length varied from thigh to knee.

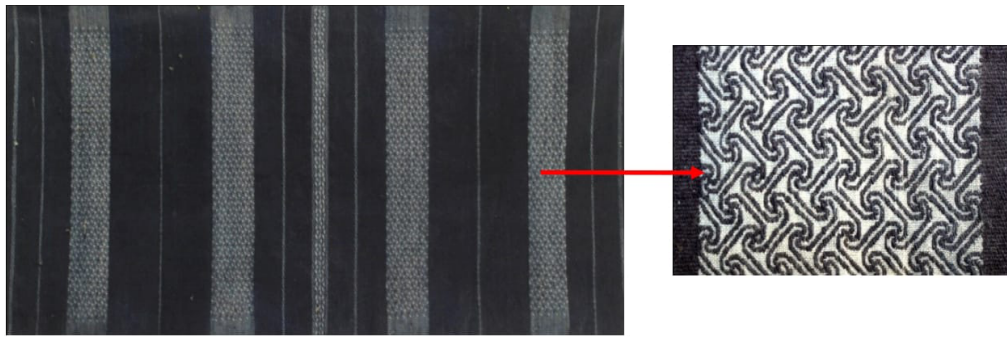
- i. **Fenggo:** As explained earlier, *ngo* in Mizo language simply means fair or white. *Fen* (or *Feng*) means to put on or wear. *Fenggo* was the first skirt worn by the Lusei girls. The skirts were tucked in firmly at the waist with the help of a waistband or brass belts. Lusei women had stopped using it since a very long time.
- ii. **Fenthuah:** It was an inner skirt used by the Lusei women. *Fenthuah* was short in length and was woven by the women of the house. It was an unstitched piece of cloth, wrap around the waist and tucked in securely at the waist. *Fenthuah* seemed to be similar to *fenngo* except that they were smaller.
- iii. **Thangchhuahpuan:** *Thangchhuah* was a title given to a knight who had distinguished himself by killing all the prescribed wild animals in the chase and preparing a feast for each kill. Such men were called *RamlamaThangchhuah* or Knight of the wild jungle. On the other hand, men who lavishly organized number of feast for the village without shooting wild animals were called *In lama Thangchhuah* or Knight of the village. The possession of this title was regarded as a free pass to *Pialral* or Paradise after death. *Thangchhuahpuan* had a very high social value and significance as only Lusei men who had earned and achieved the title *Thangchhuah* could wear it. In earlier days, only *Thangchhuahpa* and his wife could use this *puan* and they

were held at very high esteem. *Thangchhuahpuan* was used during *kūtnivāngthla* (the time of the celebrating of a public feast or festival), public gatherings and any kinds of celebrations. It was a textile woven on a dark coloured background with multicoloured stripes running both perpendicular and along the selvedge to give a check pattern (Plate-III,B). On the other hand, there is another version of *thangchhuahpuan* which was a textile with stripes woven along the selvedge with traditional motifs viz. *fanghmamu*, *semit*, *mitmurual*, *muthlakawian* and *phaiphuleng* interwoven on these stripes. The textile was no longer used as an outer covering. In recent times, the Lusei men had diversified its use by making shirts out of *thangchhuahpuan*.

- iv. **Mangpuan:** *Mang* in Mizo is another term used for chief. One of the famous Mizo songwriters, Liandala had written about this textile in one of his songs as "...*mangpuananzâr, dawnlungtlaitluanah...*" (meaning that *mangpuan* was hung on the memorial stone of the knights). Since *mang* in Mizo language can also mean soot, senior respondents added that in this song, Liandala meant to express the textile as a white cloth on which soot had been applied. This textile was kept on the memorial stones of notable knights to scare the wild animals. The Lusei had stopped using this *puan* since a very long time.
- v. **Hmarâm:** *Hmarâm* was the first patterned skirt worn by Lusei girls. In earlier times, Lusei men forming their buns at the nape of their neck were called *hmarandâm* means skirt. Thus, *hmarâm* simply means Lusei's skirt. Earlier, these skirts were named according to the patterns woven on skirt. If *lenbuangthuam* pattern was woven on the skirt, it was called *lenbuangthuam* and the same for *kawpuizikzia*. *Hmarâm* was worn only during *kūtnivāngthla* (the time of the celebrating of a public feast or festival) by the young girls.
- vi. **Puanlaisen/ puanchei:** *Puanchei* was one of the most popular traditional textiles among the Lusei women. It was earlier called *puanlaisen*. A simple textile with a red stripe at the centre. With the availability of dyed yarns in other colours, Lusei women further enhanced this textile. *Puanlaisen* began to be woven with multicoloured stripes, interwoven with traditional motifs instead of the plain red stripe. With these changes, the textile was called *puanchei* (Plate-IV,C). As mentioned earlier, *chei* means to beautify. The main characteristic features of traditional *puanchei* was that it was constructed by joining together three strips of fabric longitudinally. Also, the two black stripes woven perpendicular to the selvedge divided the *puan* into three equal parts. Further, the broad multicoloured stripes woven at the two extreme ends perpendicular to the selvedge were patterned with traditional motifs. The traditional motifs interwoven on *puanchei* were *disul*, *lenbuangthuam*, *sakeizangzia* and *halka*.



Woman's Costume: *Hmarâm* (*Lenbuangthuam*)
Photo Courtesy: Author



Woman's Costume: Hmarâm (Kawkpuizkzial), Photo Courtesy: Author



Variations of Puanchei, Photo Courtesy: Author

CONCLUSION

The traditional textiles of the Lusei tribe are related to the social status. They have deep value and cultural significance among them. Although the back strap looms were used for weaving, they were able to weave a variety of rich and distinctive textiles. Stripes of varying thicknesses were popular. The motifs were small in size, stylized geometrically and inspired by nature. Black, white and red were the common colours used.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. (2009). *Mizoram Destination that Delights*. Aizawl: Directorate of Information and Public Relations Mizoram, Government of Mizoram.
- Call, M. A. (2003). *Lushai Chrysalis*. New Delhi: Elephant Industries.
- Chatterji, N. (1978). *Puan The Pride of Mizoram*. Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited on behalf of Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl.
- Dokuma, J. (2008). *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*. Aizawl: Hmingthanpuii.
- Doshi, S. (1992). Ancestors, Gods and Spirits. In S. Doshi, *Tribal India* (pp. 39-40,44). Bombay: J.J. Bhabha for Marg Publications.
- Sangkima. (2004). An Etymological Study of the Word "Mizo". In Sangkima, *Essays On the History of the Mizos* (pp. 15-17). Guwahati: Spectrum Publishers.
- Sangkima. (2004). Social and Cultural History of the Mizos. In Sangkima, *Essays on the history of the Mizos* (p. 58). Guwahati : Spectrum Publishers.
- Thanseia. (1975). *A Brochure on Mizo Goods of Antiquity*. Aizawl: Thanseia.