



## Social Wrap: An examination of the *Puanchei*

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### Introduction

The people dwelling in the Lushai hills or what is now Mizoram is a hilly region sharing borders in the North with Manipur and East and South with Burma and to its west is Chittagong. The term Mizo is generally used as a common denotation for the several tribes that dwell within the state. The dominant tribe being the Lushai people who constitute the largest population. The Puan is the traditional attire for all the tribes, with only differences in colours and a few motifs.

So, the next question being, "What is the *Puanchei*?" To put it simply, *Puan* in Mizo means cloth and *Chei* means to decorate. It designates the traditional costume of the Mizo women. It is traditionally woven by women, on the loin loom; the Zo loom which is a frame loom and the fly shuttle loom is also used. The primary material is cotton, Puan is woven in silk and other synthetic materials as well. The *Puanchei* is generally 65" in length and 45" in breadth but the size can vary. It is woven in three pieces lengthwise, the middle one being narrowest. It always has fringes on both edges breadthwise.

The traditional way of wearing a *Puanchei* is to wrap it around oneself from the waist to the ankle. It is teamed with the *Kawrchei*, which is the blouse. The earliest known Puan was white and with time and use of natural dyes, emerged the more colourful Puan and eventually the *Puanchei*. The *Puanchei* with the *Kawrchei* is not everyday attire worn by the Mizo women. The bride and the family of the couple wear it on special occasions such as weddings. It is worn with the *Kawrchei* at traditional showcasing occasions such as at the time of Cheraw (bamboo dance).

### Design and Motifs of *Puanchei*

The Mizo people took inspiration from their geographical surroundings to build their motifs and patterns, especially of the flora and fauna native to the Lushai hills. For example, the pattern of the Lenbuantham is that of a tree called Lenbuan and *thuam* translates to 'the junction of two or more boughs or branches. This is among the more common patterns and is woven into different shapes.

*Disul* is a motif that depicts a sungrass (*Di*) and "*Sul*" means, "the long grass or weeds on or by the side of a path which brush against passers-by and thus point in the direction in which they have gone." This pattern is considered to mimic a design in the compounded word. It is also combined with other patterns. *Sakeizangzia* or *Keipuizia*, *Zia* means, "the back of the animal" and *Sakei* /*Kepui* translates as Tiger. As the description goes, this pattern is an animal motif that refers to the striped pattern of Tiger skin. Some motifs accentuate or are additions to other motifs. One such motif is that of Sawhthing or ginger flower. This motif of the ginger flower is woven and placed along or on top of other designs and patterns. *Arsi* or star, is another such motif.

Another common woven pattern is a geometrical one, zigzag which is called *Kikau*. Within this pattern, smaller patterns of four or five are woven in diamond shape.



*PuancheiWrap from the Collection of National Museum, New Delhi  
Photo Courtesy: Author*

### **Colours of Puanchei**

The colours traditionally were also derived from the available flora of the hills. The white in the Puanchei yarn is natural to the cotton. Black is extracted from the "Ting" (Assam Indigo) plant. The leaves that are pounded in a wooden trough then boiled with the yarn, mixed with ashes, wrung out and hung to dry. This process is repeated thrice for colourfastness. Besides Ting, Meithui (Japanese-varnish tree) and Khei plant juice are also used to derive the black colour. Red, the bark of plants such as 'Keifangpil', 'thilpil', 'sentezel' etc are used by following the same procedure as mentioned for dyeing black. Blue is extracted by boiling the 'Zawngbin' plant and ashes together. Yellow, the roots of the turmeric plant 'Aieng' are crushed and the yarn is boiled with it. Besides natural dyes which are rare, synthetic dyes are also now used.

### **Cultural adaptations with time**

With the coming of the missionaries and under the colonial influence, the Puanchei/Puan was experimented with and teamed with western pieces of clothing, in a way such as to highlight the "ethnic-identity by dress" of the Mizo and yet not seeming inadequate. It is around this time in history you see the Puanchei as evolving into a costume, which is the prime visual ethnic marker of the Mizo people for most Indians even today. Unfortunately for many the Puanchei at the republic day parade with women dancing the Cheraw (bamboo dance) is the only exposure to this attire. The fact that the Puanchei has deep rooted meaning for the Mizo society is something that needs more exploration. With the change from colonial to being part of the Indian republic, the Mizo were identified by the attire, which had to be curiously exotic and instantly recognizable, the Puanchei served perfectly. The Puanchei also worked as alternative attire for the women of chieftain's family after chieftainship was abolished by the Indian state.



The Puanchei/Puan does not conform to the several ideas and norms that constitute general study of costume, for example, trousers for men and dresses for women or Kurta Pyjama and Saree binary. It cannot be studied within the limits of age and social practice either. The Puanchei needs to be distanced from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> theories and authorships influenced by social evolutionism for example, Earnest Crawley who wrote extensively on Dress.

It would be an injustice to the Puanchei to limit its scope within the bounds of an object-based study alone. Object-based study emerges from the need to identify, classify, register the object, in this case the Puanchei within a limited scope of description and documentation, here mainly being the geographical location and its physical construction. This authorship is influenced (not exclusively) through the visual scope of Art history, museology etc. The style of research is general appreciation, which is more aligned to understand the object visually and materially. This of course is essential for authentication and to examine the textile construction such as weave, fabric, dyes etc, the research is time consuming and needs critical physical examination of the object especially for conservation. Dress historian Lou Taylor, the author of "Establishing Dress History" makes a strong case for Object centred approach as she argues in her book that material knowledge allows for an advantaged study of Dress.

## Conclusions

I would propose to add to the object centred approach some contextual knowledge as well, like that of the study of an architectural structure, historical event, piece of literature etc. To elaborate, the Puanchei needs to be understood as a social entity not as an object alone. In taking this line of inquiry what emerges is more inclusive and interdisciplinary, what Terrence S Turner refers to as, "The Social Skin", in his article with the same title. He states, "Decorating, covering, uncovering or otherwise altering the human form in accordance with social notions of everyday propriety or sacred dress, beauty or solemnity, status or changes in status, or on occasion of the violation and inversion of such notions, seems to have been a concern of every human society of which we have knowledge".

The other questions that arise from the dress of the Mizo women must be understood anthropologically through ethnographic study. The Puan/Puanchei is a woman's attire, so its place within the patriarchal society of the Mizo's must be one course of inquiry. Weaving is mainly the women's domain within the Mizosociety, hence the woven object is intrinsically tied to women's history.

For now it is suffice to say, the Puanchei is more than a piece of cloth and its significance and place in Mizo society needs much detailed exploration.

## Bibliography

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