

## Narratives on Chyna Poh: A Traditional Dress

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### Abstract

*This paper tries to articulate the genesis of Chyna Poh, the Mara traditional Dress. It also attempts to highlight the existing debate on its origin, its evolution and refinement, its aesthetic value, symbolism, its larger implications on the tribal social and cultural structure and how it became one of the most prized possessions of the Mara dresses.*

**Key Words:** *Chyna Poh, Vâhiah, Cawng Nak, Chief Laithlu, Sizô Ngiaphia.*

### Introduction

The study of dress as a subject has been an issue vastly neglected by historians, anthropologists or ethnographers (Janet Andrews: 2005, p.19). It was only from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that more literatures on dress became available on the academic arena. Towards this end, the contributions of sociologists such as Roland Barthes, Donald N. Levine, and Thorstein Veblen<sup>1</sup> are highly noteworthy as they revealed the need for understanding the significance of dress from the societal perspectives and for defining class relationship. The same has been articulated by Dick Hebdige and even underscored the importance of dress for sustenance and continuation of cultures.

Janet Andrews in her work, *Bodywork: Dress as Cultural Tool* has

stated that “Whether consciously or unconsciously, people convey in their appearance all kinds of information about their histories, their political ideas, their economic situation, their present ideals and their dreams for the future. As a form of communication, dress is powerful, flexible and subtle”. (Janet Andrews: 2005, p.20)

Taking note of the underlying narratives on different aspect of dress, this paper attempts to study the origin of Mara traditional dress popularly known as *Chyna Poh*. It would also analyze existing debate on its origin, its evolution and refinement, its aesthetic value, symbolism, its larger implications on the tribal social and cultural structure and how it became one of the most prized possessions of the Mara dresses.

The Maras are known for their skill in handicrafts and weaving and

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comparatively sumptuous in their dress and in appearance. There are numerous kinds of dress worn on different occasions. *Dua* or a loin cloth was an essential dress possession of Mara men, *dua kalapa* meant for routine and daily garb and *dua ah* worn while performing rituals and on ceremonial occasions. Apart from this, numerous other dresses adorn the Maras, both men and women. Mention may be made of Chylao, Chyna, Kykao, Khutho, Hnokaw, Hnorâ, Viahpakao, Zypoh, Viapoh, Pohzâh Poh, Pu-Poh, Chhâmeisôhkaru Poh, Siahripoh, Chiaraku Poh, Lary Poh, Phiphia Poh, Tlâhthôhpa Poh, Sisaihno, Viahno etc.<sup>2</sup> (Nôhro Hmôkô: 2011, p. 139)

### Contesting Narratives

Of the above mentioned dresses, *Chyna Poh* is considered as the most valued and prized possession of the Maras. However, in recent times, a contesting narrative is developed and a controversial debate arose surrounding its originality. *Chyna Poh* is also known as *Cawng Nak Puan*<sup>3</sup> by the people living in Haka and Thlantlang areas of the Chin State of Myanmar and the Lai of Mizoram. In this regard, C. Samau, a retired school teacher who is considered as an authority on this subject, has made an extensive field research on the genesis of *Chyna Poh* and argued that the Maras as a result of various cultural and political contingencies, more often than not, made matrimonial alliances with the Haka and Thlantlang chiefs and with the common folks and the fact that continuous and long history of relationship between them may have

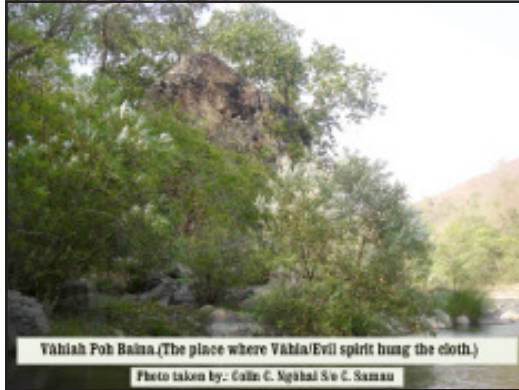
resulted in the appropriation of this dress by the latter.

C. Samau further argued that the Lai word, 'Cawng' literally means 'Study' and 'Nak' means 'Black'.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, *Chyna Poh* which is red in colour, and describing it as 'Nak/Black' appears to be out of place and that the Mara word 'Chyna' and considering its syllable, may have been transliterated as 'Cawng Nak' in Lai language.

### Narratives of Origin

Oral tradition of the Sizô Ngiaphia groups has it that around the year 1715 AD<sup>5</sup>, Laithlu, who was the Chozah chief of Sizô Ngiaphia village of the present day Chin State, one fine day ascended the hill and went down towards the Kolodyne river. While journeying through the course of the Kolodyne river, he came upon an overhanging crag facing the mighty Kolodyne river and to his astonishment saw a beautiful red dress spreading over the stone. The size of the overhanging cliff appears to be around 30 feet in height and 20 feet in breadth (C. Samau: 2015). The beautiful red cloth was actually a dress spread over the stone and adorned by *Vâhiah* (evil spirits), who are believed to have the power to cause irrepressible laughter. On seeing the cloth, Chief Laithlu at once climbed the rock face and got hold of the cloth and quickly rushed towards the village and for home.

When the *Vâhiah* (evil spirits) realized that their beautiful dress had disappeared, they immediately rummage



around for it and when they learnt that chief Laithlu had stolen it, they decided to go after him but they could not catch him as he had already reached his village. Laithlu entered his house and quickly locked the door from inside and all through the night the *Vâhiah* waited at his front door and shouting his name to return and give back the dress which they alleged, was stolen from them. However, chief Laithlu was not willing to part with his acquired possession and was determined to have it. When the *Vâhiah* realized that the chief was not willing to part with their valued dress, they then asked him to give at least a portion of the cloth and Laithlu cut a small portion on the edge and smeared it with fermented soybean and gave it to the *Vâhiah*. On seeing it that the piece of cloth was smeared with foul-smelling substance, they could not bear with the unpleasant and disgusting odor and decided to run off but only cursing him that he should put on the dress only in times of grief and not in good times.

Since the dress was so fine and beautiful, the wife of chief Laithlu decided



to imitate the texture, pattern, design and thus weaved it for herself by boiling and treating the cotton thread with a combination of plants such as Chyrai, Chari, Amao and Titâ.<sup>6</sup> Since it could not be worn on any day but only on the days of grief, the dress came to be called *Chyna Poh* meaning ‘**Cursed Dress**’. It was said that when Maidu, daughter of chief Laithlu died, the chief wrapped his daughter’s body with the same red dress that he had stolen from the *Vâhiah*. That night, the chief had a dream and his departed daughter informed him that she could not carry the dress to *athikhih*, the abode of the dead, as *Chhochôpanô/Vâhiah Nô* (evil spirit) claimed that it belonged to them and snatched away from her. The chief then lamented and said, “*Maimau peihthâ paedauh ae zaw chala, Vauh nâ phaoh nô nâ thie nâh mawh sy/Chyna poh sôhpa, ahy ta hmâh ama hnei thei leipa, hrao leipa liata ei thy ha bao cha la, Ei nâ vyhpi nâ phaoh nô khata vaw pahno*

*hra mawh sy*”<sup>7</sup> Meaning, “Oh...my valued dress, possessed by none, wasted me by giving away, let my dear mother commit to memory too”.

The overhanging rock face where Chief Laithlu found the cloth is roughly 15 Kms towards the east from Sizô Ngiaphia village located on the banks of the river Kolodyne. It is called “*Vâhiah Poh baina*” meaning, “The place where *Vâhiah* hung their cloth”.<sup>8</sup> Numerous fig (particularly *Ficus*, subg. *Urostigma*) grows on the cracks and crevice of this cliff and people near and far from the surrounding villages immensely acclaimed this place and it became a much visited spot in contemporary times.

### Conclusion

In traditional Mara society, dress was considered to have a very significant and strong bearing on the social and cultural transaction of the people. It played a very important role of communicating the social and economic status of a person to the larger audience. In this background, *Chyna Poh* symbolizes class and social status in the society as no ordinary person could own this dress. It was owned by the chiefs and eventually also owned by wealthy members of the society and was worn only on certain occasions and in times of grief and sorrow.

Over the years, *Chyna Poh* continued to become one of the most valued possessions amongst the Mara dresses. It would seem that, regardless of the social and economic status and cutting across the social structure, everyone would aspire to own this valuable clothing, and it is now worn on all important occasions and particularly during official and festive occasions. At times, as a token of appreciation, respect and honour, *Chyna Poh* would also be gifted to special and important guests.

It may be noted that in contemporary times, ownership of this beautiful traditional dress has been claimed by both the Maras and the Lais. Considering the fact that both the Lais and the Maras shared very close and long historical and cultural relationships, and bearing in mind its mystical and supernatural essence, it becomes even more difficult to ascertain the ownership of *Chyna Poh*. Moreover, in absence of ownership and patent rights, the subject continues to be opened for debate and further research. However, taking note of existing oral narratives, linguistic, geographical and physical attestations, the Maras, particularly the *Chozah* chieftainship, without doubt cherished *Chyna Poh* as intrinsically connected to them and is thoroughly embedded in their ancestral, familial and kinship make up.

**End Notes:**

- 1 For more information on Dress and culture, see Donald Nathan Levine (Ed.) *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1971, Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York. Macmillan, 1899. Dick Hebdige, *Sub Culture: The meaning of Style*, Routledge, London and New York, Taylor and Francis, 2002
- 2 For detail information on varieties and types of Mara dresses, see Nôhro Hmôkô, *Hlâno Mara Haosai*, K.L. Offset Printers, Aizawl, 2011. John Hamlet Hlychho, *The Maras: Head-hunters to Soul-hunters*, JP. Offset Printers, Aizawl, 2009. Zakhu Hlychho, *Mara-te Tobul*, JP. Offset Printers, Aizawl, 2009.
- 3 C. Samau, *Chyna Poh Thaotôna*, Unpublished manuscript, Siaha, 2015.
- 4 *Ibid*
- 5 C. Samau gave about 1600 AD as the year of Laithu's reign which is over one hundred years earlier than the year assigned by C. Thahe, i.e, 1715 AD. However, the year calculated by C. Thahe, who is an eight generation descendant of chief Laithlu and a seasoned narrator of history of the Sizô Ngiaphia groups appears to be more probable than the former.
- 6 C. Samau argued that cotton or thread is thoroughly boiled along with a mixture of Chyrai, Chari, Amao and Titâ plants which is then used for weaving *Chyna Poh*. This practice is still invoked in Sizô Ngiaphia areas.
- 7 These quotations are narrated by C. Samau, a retired school teacher of Siaha, Mizoram and also corroborated by Rev. C. Sama and Rev. Pheiki of Sizô Ngiaphia, Chin State, Myanmar.
- 8 C. samau, *Ibid*.

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6. Nathan Levine, Donald (Ed.,) (1971), *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1971.
7. Samau. C (2015), *Chyna Poh Thaotôna*, Unpublished manuscript. Siaha.
8. Veblen. Thorstein (1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York. Macmillan.
9. Oral sources were procured from the following persons; C. Samau, a retired school teacher, Siaha, Mizoram.

Rev. Pheiki and Rev. C. Sama of Chin State, Myanmar.

C. Thahe of Siaha, Mizoram and who is an eight generation descendant of Laithlu, Chief of Sizô Ngiaphia and with inputs from Colin C. Ngôhai, Aizawl.