

Commercial Endeavour in the Island of Majuli in Assam: Traditional Mishing Textiles in Transition

Lakhimi Jogendranath Chutia & Mrinmoy K. Sarma
Tezpur University, Assam

Abstract:

The paper endeavors to present the picture of transition of *Mishing* textiles from traditional costumes of daily use to products embedded with traditional and modern designs produced for the aesthetic need of the local as well as external audiences. During the qualitative survey it was found that though direct contact with outsiders influences the local artists' product; changes are mostly infused by the artists themselves irrespective of their access to customers. Artists may intuitively produce textiles with different color and design combinations. This occurs when artists get access to information about people and places of other regions, their lifestyles and fashion prevalent outside through various media which leads to innovation and diversification in the product features. In such cases artists drive the process of commercialization rather than the market driving the process. This photo essay based on oral history and in-depth interview explains how commercial endeavor by the *Mishings* is leading to changes in their traditional textiles. It also tries to look into the other differential dynamics of this tribal craft under commercial pursuit with respect to the change in clientele, use of raw materials and change in utility. Change has always been a part of human society and as such the forms of artistic expressions become a product of such an advent. Though the influences of factors on the changes may differ but change accrues and is inevitable.

Key words: Mishing textiles, Majuli, Commercialization, Transition, Assam

Introduction:

Traditional crafts present an intriguing reflection of a society, its culture and economy. Just as society evolves over time, crafts also pass through a series of transformation. Changes in traditional crafts occur as a part of cultural expression, self-satisfaction, aesthetics and creativity, a desire to make something which is pleasing. Sometimes artistic discourses may also arise when artists want to reposition themselves in the changing milieu where they could express their presence and sense of importance (Tolentino, Jr. 2012). Thus, folk arts make creative transformation in an ever changing human society. But art also has an economic value which turns it into commodities

subject to the play of market forces (Ondrusova, 2004). Search for this economic value lends traditional crafts in market dynamics and the play of such forces leads to changes in crafts. Thus a process of commercialization and hence changes in a craft sets in when any art at first used primarily for socio-political, religious or aesthetics purposes of the internal audience is converted into an item for sale (Parezo, 1981). Change is an indispensable part when folk arts are commoditized for economic transaction (Cohen as cited in Ballengee-Morris, 2002).

Such changes have also been noticed in the traditional crafts of Assam. Riverine island Majuli in Assam has been chosen for the present discourse. This ostensibly pristine river island, in the midstream of the mighty river Brahmaputra, is known for its 600 year old *Vaishnavite* culture and its mask making tradition in monasteries. Free from all chaos and worries it also nestles indigenous communities like the *Mishings*, *Deoris*, *Sonowal-Kacharis* and *Mataks* who have been dwelling cordially throughout centuries with other communities of the island. The *Mishings* as believed are one of the offshoots of Mongoloid stock (Pegu, 2013; Sarma & Choudhary, 2015) and constitutes the second largest tribe in Assam (Kaman, 2014). The tribe is highly regarded and well known for its colorful textiles. This confluence of *Vaishnavite* and tribal culture apart from its enchanting physiographic characteristics receive attention of audiences worldwide. This has also let open the arena for the *Mishing* community to economically exploit the benefit by commercializing their colorful textiles. They have consciously or unconsciously developed the art of blending colors, materials and designs to fully exploit the economic vantage accruing to the island. They have taken old world ideas of nature and baseline materials and reconfigured them into fascinating new world aesthetics that reflects in their creations.

Research Methodology:

The present discourse is based on primary data collected over a very short period of time in the month of January, 2014 in the villages and market areas of Majuli. To study the changes in the *Mishing* textiles, oral narratives of five knowledgeable respondents of Majuli who are 60 years and above and who could give an idea on the history of *Mishing* folk craft and heritage are considered. Apart from that, information regarding commercialization of the crafts is elicited through in-depth interviews with eight *Mishing* artisans engaged in production and trade of the craft. It presents a photographic representation of the changes in the textile pieces and thereby explains the dynamics of commercial endeavor of the artisans in the riverine island. The photographs so presented in the article are collected by the researchers from different locations of Majuli during the investigation period.

Discussion

The commercial pursuit of the Mishings and changes in traditional attire

Tribal communities present good examples of internal community driven production and exchange of crafts. This situation of barter and exchange generally exists in a society where large scale commerce and trade happens to be a remote occurrence (Karmakar, 2002; Vidyarthi & Rai, 1976). However, as society opens up for mercantilism due to reasons like growth of tourism or export, production of craft gets a boost (Markwick, 2001) among the community members. Till a decade or more back, commercial production of tribal crafts was certainly an uncharted trajectory among the *Mishing* tribal women in Majuli except for some production and interchange within the internal community members. Moromai Payeng who is in her early sixties, still recalls the days when people of her community used to trade off their colorful pieces within the community against other items required in their day to day lives. But today, she believes, people in her community would rather commercialize their creations, just like her daughter does, to earn money. Nowadays, nothing is exchanged but is rather sold in the market to customers from local as well as external communities. With the island getting exposure to tourists and audiences from rest of the region, artists are trying to make a living by selling their master pieces. Artists tend to create things that can be sold. In doing so, artisans often render creativity to their work which results in changes to the original craft form.



Mibu Galuk and its transition from religious to modern attire

Among many changes occurring to the textile pieces of the *Mishings*, the most visible change that is noticed is the modification in baseline design and color combination in the *Mibu Galuk*. As told by a national award winning textile weaver Jamini Payeng, this traditional jacket normally worn by the religious person called *Mibu* or *Dandai* primarily used to be in white or off white hue in natural cotton fiber. Octogenarian informants like Gamchi Kumbang and Urmila Doley, hardly remember common men folk wearing the *Mibu Galuk* except for the *Dandai* who used to wear this off-white and loose fitting attire with a front slit while performing sacred rituals and practice. Soon it transgressed into social circuit of the tribe when it was introduced for religious gatherings and marriages. Today, apart from being used in religious and customary practices it is also a fancied item

of trade. Tourists and local customers of Majuli, prefer this attire in close fitting and collared style than its traditional baggy look. Hence, artisans and entrepreneurs like Arti Pegu, Sasha Doley and Bijumoni Doley opted for producing customer liked *Galuks* in a multitude of preferred colors like green, black, red, pink and yellow. Even the designs that were once tintured only in red and black on the off white base are now offered in several brighter tones. The *Galuk* has become more vibrant and colorful with the availability of synthetic threads (known as triple zero and *Padmini* threads among the locals).

On the design front motifs like *Kangar*, *Laksin* and *Donyi-Polo-Yaksa* are still prevalent at the baseline but the body of the *Mibu Galuk* is regularly updated with new designs like *Taj Mahal* and *Xorai* (offering tray with a stand at the bottom) to bring newness and wider acceptance among the customers. *Mishing* weavers nowadays recreate older patterns less often but offer a great range of contemporary designs on this traditional wear. However, for religious functions and sacred rituals, the off white *Galuk* with traditional motifs stays the trend even today. The use of *kangar* motif that looks like the English alphabet 'X' and the neatly woven *laksin* design represents orthogoneity (Cohen, 1983) in which mere replication of the baseline designs is exercised. Whereas utilization of radically new designs like *Taj Mahal* and *Xorai* reflects what Cohen terms as heterogoneity (1983) wherein designs not regular or traditional in the culture of the artisan community is produced by the artisans. Such designs cutting across the lines of tradition or orthogoneity are creations of some ardent weavers and are unconscious or rather impulsive efforts of the indigenous artisans toward the production of something unique for sale. In connection to *Taj Mahal* motif, A. Sarma writes that it was 'symbolic of the love the weavers bore for their lovers' (2004). But for artists like Anima Kameng her super colorful *Taj Mahal* embedded *Mibu Galuk* exudes her hope towards making some hefty 1500-2000 Indian Rupees by selling it to some connoisseur. She believes that her creation can fascinate any audience the same way it captivated the authors' attention. Being poor tribal woman, she could never imagine seeing the *Taj Mahal* but feels happy weaving it on her looms to make monetary gains.



6. Green Mibu Galuk (present day) with Xorai motif and baseline Laksin gamik design



7. Xorai motif in multiple colors in present day Mibu Galuk shown on the left



8. Galuk piece in black base with Taj Mahal motif & baseline designs like Kangar



9. Taj Mahal motif in multiple colors in present day Mibu Galuk shown on the left

Mishing artisans also derive ideas from the other costume habits prevalent in the modern society. They have converted the short *Galuk* to knee length *kurtas*ⁱ to offer it to some section of change loving and experimenting customers like the youth. Artisans believe that youth prefer this variant for several festivities and occasions in Majuli.

Eri Shawl from winter clothing to pop fashion

Traditional *Eri*ⁱⁱ shawls generally woven as plain fabric to be used during winters as warm clothes and bedspreads (Mahan, 2012) have also been experimented with new designs and adjusted to new forms to facilitate its commercialization. From mere functional items, *Eri* shawls journeyed its way to decorative stoles and as a symbol of new fashion trend among the young women buyers under the commercial inclination of the *Mishing* artisans in Majuli.



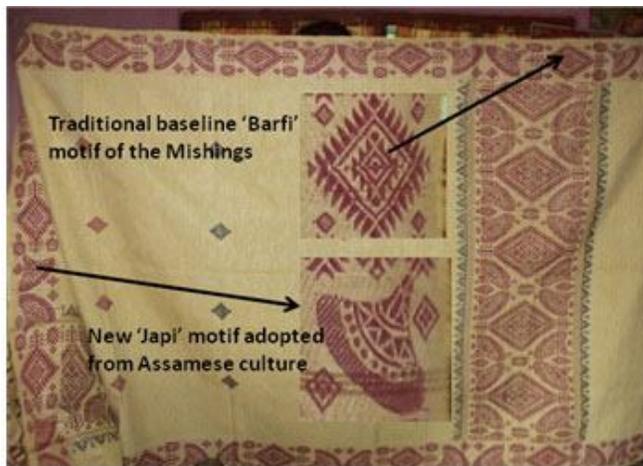
10. Eri Shawl (30-35 year old) gifted to Amrita Prabha Kameng



11. Eri Shawl (20-25 year old) purchased by Moromai Payeng from a local *Mishing* weaver with tree and mountain motif

Entrepreneur and artisan Amrita Prabha Kameng narrates the importance of *Eri* shawls as a gift item in the *Mishing* society. She recalls how her mother used to weave

plain *Eri* shawls when she was a small girl. At times she used to wonder why her mother preserves the woven fabrics in her trunk and not wear them after producing. She got her answer when her mother gifted those fabrics to her when she got married. For domestic and gifting purposes, *Eri* shawls were generally produced plain if at all with limited design on the periphery. However, for commercial exchange certain traditional designs like *gochh* (tree), *pahar* (mountain), *lota* (creeper), etc. frequently used among the *Mishings* were introduced in the *Eri* shawls. Figure 11 shows an *Eri* shawl that Moromai Payeng bought from a *Mishing* weaver of her Pharam village roughly 20-25 years back. This piece presents the artistic bent of the local weavers and their ways to capture the internal audienceⁱⁱⁱ (Graburn, 1976) through introduction of stylistic elements. Figure 12 also presents an example of such commercial endeavor by artisans. The heavily designed shawl, Amrita Prabha Kameng believes, can receive good attention from buyers. She offered fusion of traditional and contemporary designs to the otherwise plain *Eri* shawl or moderately decorated shawl that prevails at the baseline. As an artisan, Mrs. Kameng automatically feels inspired to offer newness to her customers through new design elements. It is noteworthy to notice here that *Japi* motif is not a baseline motif of the *Mishing* community but is influenced by other coexisting community of Assam.



12. *Eri* shawl with fusion of traditional 'Barfi' and new 'Japi' motif



13. *Eri* Chadar in traditional 'Lota' motif. Use of synthetic fiber in pink, black and white

Artisans of Majuli understand the commercial importance of modification and diversification of the traditional *Eri* shawl into several other functional but colorful and decorative items. Master artisan Jamini Payeng has experimented dyeing the shawls with natural ingredients like *Haldi* (turmeric) and *Hilikha*^{iv}. Her dyed shawls often find takers among the external audiences^v like domestic and international tourists visiting Majuli. This downtown shop owner has gained much insight into the likes and dislikes of the customers by being part of many national exhibitions. Jamini believes in producing something that a customer can use conveniently and in conformity with the aesthetically driven society. Hence, she is guiding her new breed of artisans to produce items like saris and *Chadar*^{vi} to entice customers seeking regular products but who would never mind buying such items in novel material like *Eri*. Figure 13 is that of a diversified product

Chadar made from *Eri* having some orthogenetic designs like *lota phul*. The *Chadar* is further beautified with additional stripes of pink, white and black synthetic fibers.

The lure for economic gains always instigates weavers to try out novel things. Artisans have started producing a narrower variant of the *Eri* shawls called stoles for the younger generation of women who likes fashion but at the same time look for something within the tradition. This is a special case of *boutiquisation* (Cohen, 2000) wherein tribal elements get incorporated into pop fashion which mostly appeals to the contemporary youth. It reflects a shift in the clientele. This variant is also, no less preferred by the tourists flocking Majuli who like flaunting this stylish piece on their western attire. *Eri* considered as the coarser fiber in previous days with limited utility is looked at today as a lucrative option by many. Artisans urge to experiment and utilize *Eri* for economic gains has opened a plethora of opportunity in a small tourist place like Majuli.

Ege and its many forms under commercial pursuit

Ege is another traditional daily wear worn from the waist to ankle with a *chadar* by the women folk. This simple but mandatory garment of the women is made by joining two ends of the fabric lengthwise. Earlier, designs woven on the *Ege* include representational baseline motifs like *Chorai* (bird), *Buta-phul* (floral motif), *Babori* (one kind of flower), *Mokora* (spider), etc. Though still woven on the garment for customers who prefer traditional designs of the *Mishings*, increasingly in the past few years change in design is more evident from the use of large sized motifs. Another distinct change in the use of the motifs is related to its extent of spread on the garment. Former artisans like Memsy Doley and Gamchi Kumbang recall the days when they used to weave small motifs in a sequence to produce different geometrical and angular patterns like diamond, triangle, mountain, vertical and horizontal line and oblique line pattern, etc. These finely woven motifs were known as *Mihi-Phul*. Older generation of *Mishing* women reflects upon the use of broader set of *Mihi-Phul* on the *Ege* where the main design was confined only to the bottom part with the top part being left plain. Although for domestic purpose village women may never mind to wear a scantily decorated piece without motifs woven on the rest of the part, but for commercial purpose and even for the local people *Ege* is nowadays woven with motifs above the main design instead of keeping the part plain. However, the price offered by the customer also determines the breadth of adornment on the *Ege*. Figure 14 and 15 represents some 75 and 70 year old *Ege* pieces with intricately woven *Mihiphul* in triangle and diamond patterns respectively.



18. Some traditional baseline motifs

According to enterprising artisans of Majuli, axiomatic changes have encrypted in the use of motifs in the recent years. Weavers have increasingly started meandering large sized floral motifs somewhat similar to the earlier motifs but often reflecting some degree of heterogeneity. There are influences of modern art on the tribe's woven products in recent times (A. Sarma, 2004). Motifs of deer, flowers, toys, etc. are newer introduction to the already existing ones (*ibid*). For commercial exchange, artisans prefer weaving larger motifs which require less effort to produce beside being appealing to the modern eyes. Figure 19 represents some new motifs that artisans are introducing in traditional *Mishing* clothing. It is to be noticed that baseline motifs are also used along with new motifs offering a fusion of traditional and modern designs as in Figure 19 (D) where small *Babori* motif is combined with another large floral motif. Likewise, some motifs are drawn from other cultural groups (as shown in figure 19 B & 19 E) and introduced in *Mishing* wears. In many cases, artisans own creativity also leads to radically new design elements. In their endeavor to earn more, artisans often compete with each other by offering combination of designs adding up to the existing resource base.



Some artisans and entrepreneurs like Bijumoni Doley and Jamini Payeng who had chance to see the fashion trend prevalent outside as part of exhibition troops, derived ways to put *Ege* to different uses. Inspired from items of the contemporary world and motivated by the demand of such products, they have diversified *Ege* fabric into products like ladies *Kurta* (Figure 21) and bags (Figure 20). These *Kurtas* are popular among tourists to Majuli and also favorite among the young girls of their community. Artisans also see the economic benefit of transforming *Ege* into fashioned wrapper for the local as well as the external markets. *Ege* experimented as table cloth and pillow covers have also found few takers.

Gero from traditional clothing to souvenir

Gero is mandatory traditional garment for the newlywed *Mishing* woman. It is used as a loin cloth worn over the regular *Ege*, *Chadar* and blouse piece to complete the traditional *Mishing* attire. Like the *Mibu Galuk*, *Gero* was also produced in white or off white base with the main design arrayed in the middle section and arranged vertical to the length of the fabric. This vertical design is the soul of the *Gero* which sets it apart from the rest of the *Mishing* garments. Figure 22 represents a 50 year old *Gero* piece in the conventional off white base with the primary design confined to the middle section. Today, it is available in many fancied colors, new designs and raw material combination. Since the materializing of tourism phenomenon from around the year 2000, *Gero* has attracted the souvenir seeking tourist's attention. These external audiences often buy this magnificent piece to be used as muffler or *dupatta* and never fail to carry another piece as souvenir for their dear ones. Normally made in cotton and wool, *Gero* is also produced nowadays in high-priced *Eri* fiber for the high end tourists. *Mishing* artisans of Majuli believe in offering old products in new materials for such select audiences. To accommodate it as a *Dupatta* or Muffler, artisans sometimes reduce the size of the *Gero* without compromising with the placement of the main design on the piece. However, for adding more volume and hence to claim more price, many artisans have started offering designs throughout the piece. Baseline designs as shown in figure 23 and 24 are unquestionably

replicated but new designs like *Bichani* (fan) and *Hikoli* (chain) as shown in figure 26 A and 26 B are increasingly used to cater to the newness seeking customers.



23. Gero (50 year old) in traditional white base with baseline motif shown in bottom enlarged picture

24. Gero (10 year old) in green base with traditional Barfi motif

25. Gero (1 year old) made in Eri yarn & new Hikoli motif

26. A- New motif Hikoli
26. B- New motif Bichani

Artisans have moved away from the perpetuation (Cohen, 1983) of producing this garment only as a traditional costume piece but have started finding other alternative uses to fit this marvelous piece into the modern world. As a result, certain modifications have encrypted in the use of color, raw materials, size and motifs due to such complementary situations of present times.

Conclusion

Through this qualitative discourse, it has been realized that the pursuit of commercial gains has modified the *Mishing* artisans' creative bent driving them to produce items that can draw customer attention. Undoubtedly, influence to produce products applicable to the market taste does permeate through various modes of communication, but there is no denial to the fact that artists render constructiveness to their creations due to their impulsive desire to create products that can harbor economic gains. Some artisans like Chandrama Regon and Anima Kameng regularly update themselves about contemporary fashion through television media while for some who are lucky to become a part of the exhibition troupes, understanding the taste and desire by observing people's lifestyles and modern habits become even easier. Diversified products like bags, *Kurtas*, wrappers, mufflers and stoles highlight the enduring efforts of the artisans of Majuli to produce convincing and usable but aesthetically *Mishing* products for the customers. The commercial endeavor among the *Mishing* weavers is leading to the transition in the

design and structure of the traditional garment of the community. Artisans have adopted heterogeneous design elements to complement the use of orthogenetic design in order to keep the products interesting and in demand.

A drift can be seen in the use of basic raw materials too as artisans are increasingly using synthetic yarns replacing the tradition of using handspun cotton and *Eri* fiber due to its ready access, less cost and available color choice. However, retired professor and known community worker in Majuli, Padmadhar Pegu links it to the commercial effort of the artisans. He believes that unlike the yesteryear artisans, *Mishing* women today no more adhere to self production and consumption. Mushrooming of Self Help Group culture has given every talented artisan an opportunity to earn. Hence, for commercial benefit artisans rather prefer synthetic yarn to produce more in less time and at lesser cost. Artisans understand that internal audiences prefer buying products that are normally made of synthetic ones for day-to-day use. But for customers like tourists who can pay, some products like Gero are nowadays produced with *Eri* to make it more appealing and brilliant in quality terms.

Observations and discussions also bring to light the changes artisans are introducing in terms of color usage. Jamini Payeng candidly explains the reason to make textiles in lighter hues for the international and domestic tourists to Majuli cutting across the preferred tradition of using bright and darker hues of red, green, black and orange. As these customers prefer lighter hues Ms. Payeng offers naturally dyed *Eri* stoles and shawls in mild colors. Artisans are also introducing standardization with respect to size specifications. *Ege* and *Chadars* are no more woven depending on the size and height of the person as was in fashion in earlier days. Irrespective of the local or external audience these are made at a standard size of 2.75 mts (length) and 40 inches (breadth) and 2.5 mt (length) and 36 inches (breadth) respectively. With such standard specification in use artisans are hoping to access export markets. However, at certain times these specifications also come from external buyers like wholesalers and retailers from places like Guwahati, Calcutta and Delhi for few artisans.

The present discourse has revealed various facades of commercialization of *Mishing* textiles in Majuli. *Mishing* artisans are tacitly introducing changes in various spheres to accommodate their products in the gradually expanding market base comprising of the local customer and tourists. Artisans are innovating, diversifying and transforming the traditional garments keeping in view the economic imperative that it offers. Change is thus becoming an inevitable part of the commercial endeavor in Majuli.

Endnotes

ⁱ Kurta is a loose, knee length collarless shirt worn by people generally on a pyjama or salwar.

ⁱⁱ Eri or Endi is a kind of non-mulberry silk produced from the silkworm 'Philosamis ricini'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Internal customer or internal audiences are people who hail from the artisan's culture.

^{iv} The botanical name of Hilikha is *Terminalia chebula* L

^v External audience or external customers are people who are not from the cultural background of the artisan.

^{vi} Chadar is a piece of upper garment draped by women in Assam.

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Lakhimi Jogendranath Chutia (1st author) is a Research scholar in the Dept. of Business Administration, Tezpur University, Assam. Her area of interest surrounds the traditional crafts, its sustainable development, and marketing. She is pursuing her research with respect to the commercialization of the traditional crafts of Assam

Mrinmoy K Sarma (2nd author) is a senior Professor in the Dept. of Business Administration, Tezpur University, Assam. He takes keen interest in the traditional craft sector of Assam. He has written few books on tourism and crafts and has published many research articles in reputed journals.