

## Traditional Costumes of Kabui Rongmei Tribe of Manipur

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### Abstract

The article documents the costumes of *Kabui* tribe of Manipur popularly known as *Rongmei*. The basic feature of tribal costumes of Manipur is wraparounds called *phanek* and drapes. Costumes of *Kabui* tribe consists mainly of *phanek* called *feisoi*, drapes like *feingao*, jewellerys and other accessories like headgear, sash, etc. There are varieties of *phaneks* and drapes on the basis of their used by different sex, occasions and age. Traditional garments are made of fabric woven in back strap loom in every household in the past. *Kabuis* use warm colours mostly red, orange, green, blue and black in their garments. Earlier the traditional garments were woven only with cotton yarn but at present, it has been replaced by acrylic yarns because of its availability in various shades and colours, reasonable price and ease of care. Tribal costumes are highly colourful having aesthetic and religious values associated to them. Christianisation has brought a drastic change in the cultural life of the tribes of Manipur. Among the tribes of Manipur the *Kabui* cannot be fully blown off by the wave of Christianity still retaining its ancient animistic who religion who worship nature and keeping their traditional costumes alive.

**Keywords:** *Kabui*, *feisoi*, costumes, traditional and *phanek*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Kabui* tribe is one of the sub tribes of the *Naga* and distributed in Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. They are popularly called *Rongmei* which is literally derived from two words “*ruang*” and “*mei*” which means “south” and “people” respectively, thus stands for the southerners who moves to *Tamenglong* district of Manipur. The ancestral home of the *Kabui* tribe lies in the mountain ranges in the *Tamenglong* sub division of Manipur. They are also found in the adjacent mountainous areas of

Nagaland and Assam. The *Kabui* settled in Manipur in the southern portion of the state which is considered as the vast tract of *Kabui* country. They fall under the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongolian race. The earliest settlement of the *Ruangmei* in *Imphal* valley was more than a century old. The *Ruangmei* started to be called *Rongmei* in the *Imphal* valley. The family lineage is patrilineal and followed patriarchal hierarchy. They are enlisted in the Constitution as one of the twenty-nine tribes of India. *Kabui* tribes can be divided into four clans:

*Kamei*- This clan is again divided into seven sub clans

*Golmei*- This clan is again divided into five sub clans

*Liangmei*- There is no sub clan

*Gangmei* -This clan is again divided into two sub clans

All these clans are exogamous. The *Kabuis* speak *Kabui* dialect. Agriculture is their main occupation. Rice is their main crop and it is their staple food. They are also engaged in occasional hunting too. Fishing is another occupation of this tribe. Weaving is an indispensable skill of the *Kabui* women done in subsistence scale which is carried out in the loom. *Gan-ngai* is their biggest festival celebrated annually in December or January.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was a descriptive study. In order to gather the relevant and authentic information, personal interview and observation methods were used. A checklist was prepared for personal interview. Secondary information was collected from various sources like books, Manipur State Museum, Tribal Research Institute, Imphal and through some sites. *Kabui* tribe of *Naorem* village, located near *Nambol* town was selected for the personnel interview. The particular village was selected on the basis of accessibility of the researcher to the major population of the village which is *Kabui*. A small group meeting of 10-15 adult was held at the house of the village chief and the purpose of the study was explained to the villagers in the presence of the village chief. As a resolution of the meeting the key informants were decided on the basis of their knowledge level regarding their traditional costumes. The key informant belonged to the *Kamei* clan of the *Rongmei* tribe.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The traditional costumes *Kabui* tribe mainly consists of wraparound skirt or *phanek* called *feisois*, scarves, shawls, ornaments and accessories like sash, headgears, etc. The traditional garments are exclusively made of handwoven fabric. The traditional garments are still in use in day-to-day wear by different sections of *Kabui* population. It is most commonly worn still today among the women especially adult and the married ones.

### 3.1. Costumes of Kabui tribes:

#### 3.1.1 Female costumes

The traditional costumes of *Kabui* women consists of different items which are shown in the Table 1.

**Table 1:** Female costumes of *Kabui* tribe

Sl.No.	Upper garments	Lower garments	Ornaments	Accessories	
				Scarves/shawls	Headgears
1	-----	<i>Langhou feisoi</i>	<i>Tadip-awakon</i>	<i>Fang- fei</i>	<i>Sanadong</i>
2	-----	<i>Khim-feisoi</i>	<i>Tadan-tu</i>	<i>Feingao</i>	<i>Langdoi hu</i>
3	-----	<i>Langjin-feisoi</i>	<i>Tan- tadu</i>	<i>Feimu-fei</i>	-----
4	-----	<i>Langli-feisoi</i>	<i>Bei- thinglem</i>	<i>Feimu-fei</i>	-----
5	-----	<i>Feimu-feisoi</i>		<i>Lanthu-feingao</i>	-----
6	-----	<i>Khamtang-feioi</i>		<i>Fei-ngao laona</i>	-----
7	-----			<i>Bunkam</i>	-----

The fabric used as garments have designs imparted through extra weft figuring method. The motifs used are geometrical in nature with religious significance. Ethnic symbols, painting on the wall of houses and the symbol of gods were the sources of motifs according to the key informants. *Kabuis* used warm colors mostly red, orange, green, blue and black in their garments. Both wraparound and the shawl are made on the loom using different coloured threads mostly cotton and silk in olden days. At present mostly synthetic yarns, especially acrylic has replaced the cotton threads.

#### i) Upper garments

There were no upper garments in the traditional costumes of *Kabui* tribe. In order to cover their upper bodies *Kabui* ladies, wrapped their body with *Feisoi* under the arms covering the bust and covered their upper body with scarf called *fang* and shawls called *feingao*.

#### ii) Lower garments

*Kabui* ladies wore wraparound skirt or *phanek* called *feisoi* as lower garment by wrapping around their body under the arms and above the bust starting from right side, taking around the body then finally tucking in to the left side. At present women wear *feisoi* at the waist level and it reaches upto ankle length or slightly above. *Feisoi*

means *phanek* in their dialect. *Feisois* are of different types according to the occasions when worn and age group of the wearer. They are as follows:

- *Khim-feisoi*
- *Langhou feisoi*
- *Langjin-feisoi*
- *Langli-feisoi*
- *Feimu-feisoi*
- *Langmu feisoi*

***Khim-feisoi* (Fig. 1)**

It is woven in solid color with broad red bands with free threads hanging as designs and small bands of black, green, yellow and white in the borders. It bears small geometric designs on the white band. The border is woven separately and sewn with the body. It is mostly worn by old ladies and it is commonly made of colors like brown, beige and their shades.

***Langhou feisoi* (Fig. 2)**

It is used in casual wear. It is worn by adult ladies in day-to-day at home. It is similar to *Mayek Naibi Phanek* of the *Meiteis* with the difference that it has plain border which is embroidered in case of the *Meitei*'s. *Langhou feisoi* is available in varieties of colors.

***Langjin-feisoi* (Fig. 3)**

It is striped wraparound with broad red border with uniform stripes of small and bigger ones alternate throughout the body in a regular pattern. The borders are woven along with the body itself. It is worn by adolescent and young ladies. It is available in varieties of hues and values.

***Langmu feisoi* (Fig. 5)**

It is worn during *gan-ngai* festival. Dancers participating in the *Kabui* dance during *gan-ngai* festival wear *Langmu feisoi*. It is also worn by ladies while attending marriage function. *Langmu feisoi* is formed by joining four separate panels of fabrics. It has broad red borders along the selvages with small white bands having woven designs of green, red and blue. It has white and black bands running continuously lengthwise on the body with two small bands may be yellow and green separating these.

*Khim-feisoi* (Fig. 1), *langjin-feisoi* (Fig. 3), *langli-feisoi* and *feimu-feisoi* are worn by the *Kabui* ladies in festivals, functions and some special occasions.



**Fig. 1:** *Khim-feisoi with langthu-feingao* Size:122\*240cm(L\*B)



**Fig. 2:** *Langhou-feisoi and feingao shawl* Size:108\*164cm(L\*B)



**Fig. 3:** *Langjin-feisoi*



**Fig. 4** *Wearing Langjin-feisoi*



**Fig. 5:** *Langmu-feisoi*



**Fig. 6:** Kabui women's dancing costume



**Fig.7:** Spiral brass bangle



**Fig. 8:** Tadan-tu necklace



**Fig.9:** Tan-tadu brass bracelet



**Fig. 10:** Other brass and ivory jewellerys of Rongmei/Kabui

### (iii) Ornaments

Old and adult ladies wear ear-ring called *tadip-awakon* and necklace called *tadan-tu* (Fig. 8) along with both casual as well as dancing costume. Adult ladies wear *tan-tadu* (Fig. 9) bracelet in casual wear. While dancing, the adult women wear *bei-*

*thinglem* (Fig. 6) ear-ring. Spiral brass bangle (Fig.7 ) is used by *Kabui* tribes in their traditional costumes. Fig. 10 shows other brass and ivory jewellery used by *Rongmei* tribes.

#### (iv) Accessories

Costumes of *Kabui* ladies will not be completed without accessories. The accessories used includes

- Shawls
- Scarf
- Sash
- Headgears

The details pertaining to these accessories are:

#### Shawls

Shawls used in the costumes of *Kabui* ladies are *feimu fei*, *feingao*, *langthu-feingao* and *feingao laona*. These shawls are worn on specific occasions, festivals and functions.

*Feimu fei* is a small shawl

*Feingao* is larger than *feimu fei* shawl. It is used as casual wear; is a plain white shawl with broad red and small yellow, green and black band (Fig.2).

*Kabui* ladies wear shawls like *langthu-feingao* (Fig.1) and *feingao laona* in religious ceremonies and festivals.



**Fig. 11** *Bunkam* (Size: 160\*22.5)

#### Scarf

*Kabui* ladies use scarf called *fang fei* (Fig.5) to cover their breast. Pins are used to fastened if necessary.

### Sash

Sash called *bunkam* (**Fig.11**) is tied above the waist over *feiso*. It functions as the waist band.

### Headgear

Females of all age groups wear headgear called *sanadong* (**Fig.12**). Ladies wear *sanadong* headgear in marriage ceremonies. Adult and the adolescent girls also wear *langdoi hu* headgear while dancing.

At present *Kabui* ladies wear tops which matches their *feiso*s in their traditional costumes. They wear *feiso*s at the waist level. Traditionally, ladies wore *feiso*s above the breast and also wore *fang fei* scarf to cover their bare body.



**Fig. 12:** *Sanadong*

### **3.1.2 Male costumes**

The *Kabui* men's traditional costumes consists of wraparound called *feiso*, scarves, shawls, ornaments and accessories. The traditional costumes are still worn by the *Kabui* men in festivals and occasions. The size of the *feiso*s are smaller than that of women. Sometimes men's *feiso*s are of same size with that of the women which is worn by folding lengthwise. It reaches upto kneelength. Table 4.2 lists the articles of traditional costumes used by the *Kabui* men.

**Table 2:** Male costumes of *Kabui* tribe

Sl.no.	Upper Garments	Lower garments	Ornaments	Accessories		
				Shawls/scarves	Headgear	Others
1.	-----	<i>Feirak-feisoi</i>	<i>Tadip-awakon</i>	<i>Khoukhram feipong</i>	<i>Chhei</i>	<i>Bangchaku sword</i>
2	-----	<i>Feirak-langlan</i>	<i>Tadan-tu</i>	<i>Feimu feipong</i>	-----	<i>Pheikam</i>
3	-----	<i>Song-nai</i>	<i>Bankamarmlet</i>	<i>Mareipan</i>	-----	-----
4	-----	<i>Langlan</i>	-----	<i>Mashin feipong</i>	-----	-----
5	-----	-----	-----	<i>Feuingao feipong</i>	-----	-----
6	-----	-----	-----	<i>Feingao fei.</i>	-----	-----
7	-----	-----	-----	<i>Shenlan</i>	-----	-----

**(i) Upper Garment**

Like *Kabui* women, men also do not have any upper garment as such in their traditional costume. Instead, they wrapped different types of scarves and shawls wrapped on their upper body.

**(ii) Lower garment**

*Kabui* men wear different types of feisois according to the occasion and respective of their ages. Different types of male *feisois* are :

- *Feirak-feisoi*
- *Feirak langlan*
- *Song-nai*
- *Langlan*
- *Khudei*

*Feirak-feisoi* is a rectangular piece of fabric having stripes of white, yellow, green and black on red background. It is constituted of different panels of fabric woven separately and sewn together. There are geometrical motifs on the small white band which runs near the selvage. It is folded lengthwise, wrapped around the waist and

tucked with the remaining end securely. Old, adult and adolescent males wear *feirak-feisoi* as the occasional wear(**Fig.13**).

Old and adult men wear *feirak langlan* while dancing with *fei-ngao feipong* scarf.

Adolescent boys wear *song-nai* wraparound during dancing. It is worn in the religious occasion. It is paired with *fei- ngao* scarf. Pre-schoolers also wear *song-nai* on occasions.

*Langlan* wraparound is worn by men during occasions and festivals.

*Khudei* is actually a day-to-day garment worn by *Meitei* men. It is also worn by *Kabui* men. Geriatric and adult men also wear *khudei*. It is a rectangular plain weave fabric with check design in border. It is available in various colors. Men's *feisois* reach upto the kneelength (**Fig.14**).

The method of wearing *feisois* are same for all types of *feisois* as that of women's.



**Fig.13:** *Feirak-feisoi* (Size:137\*76cm), *Shenlan* , *Mareipan scarf* and *Bangchaku sword* (from right to left)



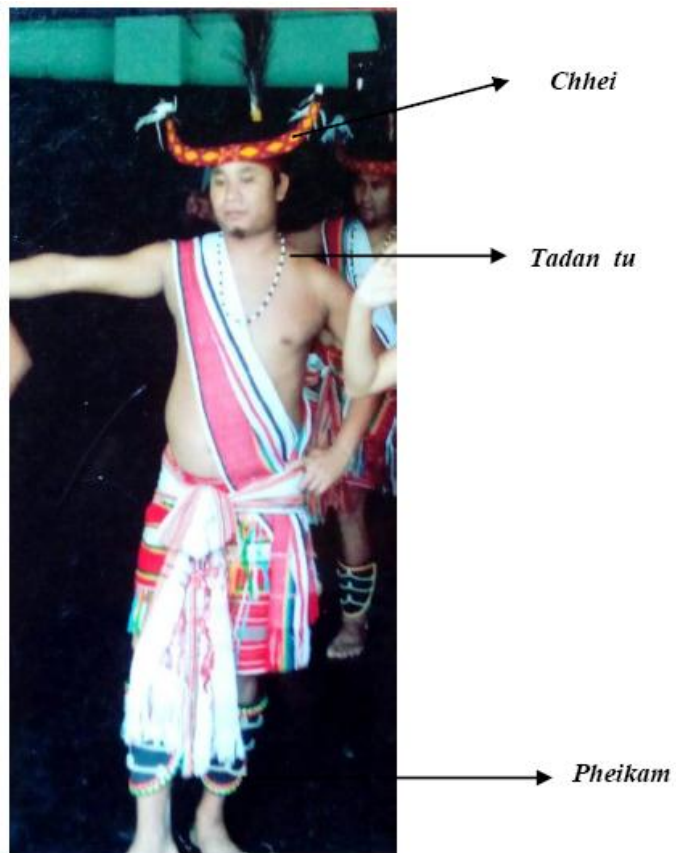
**Fig. 14:** *Kabui man wearing Khudei*



**Fig.15:** *Khoukram feipong*



**Fig.16:** A boy in *feirak –feisoi, shenlan* waist cloth, *mareipan* scarf and *Bangchaku* sword



**Fig. 17** *Kabui* men's dancing costume

**(iii) Ornaments**

Men wear *tadip-awakon* (ear-ring) and *tadan-tu* (necklace) as both casual and occasional attire. They also wear armband called *bankam*.

**(iv) Accessories**

*Kabui* men use various type of traditional costume in which their traditional costume will not be completed. The accessories include:

- Shawl
- Scarf
- Sash
- Headgear
- Others

**Shawl*****Khoukhram feipong***

The shawl used by old men is known as *Khoukhram feipong* (**Fig.15**). It is worn by old men with *feirak-feisoi* as casual dress. *Khoukhram feipong* is a black shawl with a big red border with small stripes in regular interval. It is a plain weave fabric without any kind of design in the entire fabric. But it has stripes made by extra weft threads of multiple colors in both the ends of the fabric. It is a big shawl made by joining two separate pieces.

**Scarf**

There are different types of scarves used by *Kabui* men for various purposes.

***Feimu feipong***

*Feimu feipong* scarf is worn by adult men with *feirak -feisoi*. *Feimu feipong* is hung on one shoulder and the two ends are pinned up at the waist on the opposite side.

***Mareipan***

*Mareipan*, is a small scarf used by teenagers in casual dress. It is paired with *feirak-feisoi*. It has broad red border with narrow bands of white, black, orange and green colors with a white band in the centre bearing extra weft geometrical designs. These wraps are also used in occasional wear.

***Mashin feipong***

During festivals and occasions old men use *mashin feipong*. It is a plain weave simple cloth without any design but it has blue and red stripes at both ends horizontally.

***Feingao feipong***

During festivals and occasions adult men used *feingao feipong*. *Feingao feipong* is draped on one shoulder and the two ends are pinned up at the waist on the opposite side. Pins may be used to fastened. Sometimes *feingao feipong* is wrapped by starting

from one shoulder, carrying across the back then front and draping the remaining end on the shoulder from where it has started.

### ***Feingao fei***

*Feingao fei* is a small scarf. During festivals and occasions, teenagers and adolescents used *feingao fei* with *song-nai* wraparound.

### **Sash**

Men used waist cloth called *Shenlan* over the *feisoi* at the waist to fasten the *feisoi* securely. It is a solid blue or black colour sash with red, yellow and green bands on the selvage along with some cross-sectional stripe border having extra weft geometric designs.

### **Headgear**

Males of all age groups wear headgear called *chhei* (*chirong*) (**Fig. 17**).

### **Others**

*Pheikam* (**Fig. 17**), a shield tied at the leg along with a sword called *bangchaku* (**Fig.16**). It is used in dancing costume.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The weaving is not mechanized till date and it is done in the subsistence scale in their local setting, so, the production is still low and the price is high as a result it becomes difficult for lower income group people to acquire all the components of traditional costumes. According to the respondents, the dead bodies are buried with the full traditional costumes along with accessories so, as a result, the number of traditional costumes retained with them have been reduced.

The record of items depicts also the possession and culture of the tribal communities. The fabric design and accessories which comprised traditional garments manifested the material culture in efficient manner. The source of material, process of fabric manufacture and its utilization in their costume reflected not only the flora and fauna of the area but also reflected the simple living amongst tribal community of *Kabui*.

It is a noble task to document the rich, colourful, vibrant and resplendent tribal costume in such a way that it provides a valuable source of knowledge to the future researchers and future generations. So, study is one such attempt to preserve the colourful tribal culture.

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