

**First report of the project: Traditional craftsmanship of Longpi or Loree black Stone Pottery** (file no. File No. 28-6/ICH-Scheme/2015-16/2821/04/2016)

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**Introduction of the project:**

Longpi or Loree black stone pottery (locally known as Longpi hampai) is a unique traditional craft, handmade in the northern part of Ukhrul Dist. Of Manipur, they reflect generations of knowledge and craftsmanship.

Longpi is the name of the village from where the name of pottery is derived. It is a vibrant Tangkhul Naga village situated about 120 kilometres away from Imphal city, the capital of Manipur, which is one of the North Eastern states of India bordering Sagaing and Chin areas of Myanmar. The village is considered amongst the oldest villages of the Tangkhul Naga tribe with rich folk history and culture. Longpi Kajui is flanked by other Tangkhul villages comprising Nungbi Khullen in the east, Sihai in the south east, Lunghar in the south, Phungcham, Paorei, Peh in the west and Kalhang in the North. The village is renowned for its traditional black pottery called “Longpi Hampai” and its fine pots are seen in the hearth of every Tangkhul households. Among the Tangkhuls, only Humphum village and Longpi village were known for pottery making, and they are believed to have supplied to every Tangkhul villages, near and far. Pottery making in Humphum is now non-existent and Longpi remains the only Tangkhul village where traditional pottery making crafts still exists. Longpi Hampai, today has become an important symbol of identity for the Tangkhuls in its interaction with the present social system of Manipur and beyond, which is an amalgamation of different ethnic tribes and communities.

**Myth associated with the pottery making:** The art of pottery making among Longpi villagers is believed to have existed since time immemorial. A local myth has it that the art was passed on to mankind by a deity, locally called ‘*Kameo*’. The deity is said to have led the villagers to the sites where the clay and the serpentines rocks are found.

**Objectives of the project:** For the purpose of this research, the primary datas through personal interviews, interactions with the potters/villagers and first-hand documentation of information from the location through photographs are collected. Apart from the primary sources, extensive secondary mostly of anthropological works related to the subject has been referred to make the work more effective.

Traditional craftsmanship is a social and cultural issue, as well as an economic one. Like other forms of intangible cultural heritage, globalization poses significant challenges to the survival of traditional forms of this craftsmanship. Mass production on the level of large multinational corporations and the local cottage industries, pose a challenge to the local struggling craftsman because of the supply of goods needed for daily life at a lower cost, both in terms of currency and time, than the hand production.

This is one signal that mastering tools and working with one’s hands is receding in as a valued skill, as a cultural influence that shaped thinking and behaviour in vast sections of the country.

They're every bit as much a part of our cultural heritage as grand museums, fine buildings and admired works of art or literature. They helped, to make us who we are. In 2003, UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – adopted a Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, including "traditional craftsmanship", which argued that any effort to safeguard traditional craftsmanship should focus not on preserving craft objects, but on creating conditions that will encourage artisans to continue to produce crafts of all kinds, and to transmit their skills and knowledge to others. The traditional craftsmanship of Longpi black stone pottery has been an age old craft which provides family sustenance income to the village. This process of handing down of the art from generation to generation has been disturbed and challenged by the establishment of local cottage industries and mass production by multinational cooperation.

An effort here is not just to preserve and safeguard the traditional craftsmanship of the craft object but the focus is on creating awareness and conditions that will encourage artisans to continue to produce this crafts, and to transmit their skills and knowledge to others. It is alarming and disturbing that at present the traditional art of making black stone pottery of Longpi is known to only few people in the village, the efforts are made to support the continuing transmission of this knowledge and skill and help to ensure the crafts continue to be practiced within this community/village this priceless art will be gone forever.

#### **Documentation of the project (details process of the making pots)**

The Talcose Serpentinite rock used in the making of Longpi Hampai is found scattered in the nearby mountain ranges but is chiefly concentrated in kaphungram which is about 2 kilometres from the village. The rocks unlike the soil can be collected at any time of the year as the potter requires.



*Figure: Kaphungram, the site where the talcose serpentinite rock is found*

The clay is found exclusively in a place called *Sala Kaphung* (Sala hill), about 4 kilometres away from the village. *Sala kaphung* is a picturesque place located in Nungbi Khullen near the river that flows between the mountain ranges of Nungbi Khullen and Khamasom.

*Figure 1: The picturesque landscape of Sala Kaphung overlooking the mountain ranges of Khamasom village.*



**(a) Collection of the clay and rocks**

The clay is burgundy red in color and is a little moist in its natural occurring state. The lateritic soil is formed by weathered rocks and lies about 10 to 15 feet under the ground. The desired layer of soil found is then traced as they make a hollow route for one man to crawl through. Potters in tracing the desired clay underneath the ground faced great risks of the above ground collapsing on them. And there have been incidences of deaths in the past owing to such collapses. Due to the risks involved, the digging process is usually done in groups and potters tries to stock up their required quantity of soil to last the whole year in this season. The excavated ground is then filled up with soils from the surrounding areas and left to fallow for a year or two.

*Figure 2: Kala Kaphung, where the lateritic soil is excavated for making Longpi Hampai.*







Figure 3: *The burgundy color lateritic soil*

- (b) **Drying the soil and the rock:** The collected rocks and clay are then dried in the sun for a day or two before pounding into powder. It is important for the clay not to be in contact with water at this stage as it diminishes the quality of the clay. Pots made out of such clay usually develops cracks and is therefore given utmost care during this stage.



Figure 4: *The sun-basked talcose serpentinite rock is broken into small pieces with the help of traditional wooden hammer.*

### (c) Grinding The Soil And Rocks Into Powder

The dried rock blocks are broken down into smaller rocks with the help of a hammer, which is further pounded in a rectangular stone anvil called 'Lungrar' with a spherical stone hammer called 'Vangshangkawui' to break it down into rock pebbles. The pebbles are then pounded on a wooden mortar called 'Shimkhur' with a wooden pestle called 'Suk' as potters attempt to grind them into powdered rock particles. The dried soil is also grinded into fine powdered particles in the 'Shimkhur' with 'Suk'. The coarse particles of the soil powder and the rock powder are then sieved using 'Hakha naya' which is a traditional bamboo woven basket sieve.

The sieved rock powder and soil powder are mixed with water in the ratio of 5:3:2 respectively in a flat rectangular wooden trough called 'Likhu' and made into a paste by kneading. The paste is again pounded in the 'likhu' with the 'Suk' to make a finer paste. The paste is then ready for making pots. Potters wrapped the paste in polythene bags to retain its moisture content and store it for future use.



*Figure 5: The rock and the clay is pounded into fine power in the 'shimkhur' with a 'suk'. Figure 6: Hakha naya, a traditional bamboo woven basket sieve.*



*Figure 7: Likhu, a flat rectangular wooden trough that serve as a plate to mix rock powder and soil powder.*

### **Making Pots**

Longpi pottery crafts involve the coiling method and pots are shaped by hand with the help of traditional molding tools. Once the paste is ready, potters begin their pottery making by handling a lump of paste in between the palms to create a round slab which will later form the base of the pot. To make it evenly flat, it is pressed against a flat wooden plank by hand and also with a bamboo roller called as 'hamkhrou'. The evenly flattened paste is then cut out into a round shape using the lid of utensils or other circular objects. The size of the rounded base depends on the size of the pot the potter desires to make. The base is then kept at a flat wooden anvil call 'ham tatan'.

A bigger lump of the paste is again taken and rolled in the wooden plank, by hand, turning it into a solid cylindrical shape. The length of the cylindrical roll is measured in accordance with the size of the base.





Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

After the desired size is arrived, the cylindrically-shaped roll is flattened by hand and made even using 'hamkhlou' which is then cut out into a rectangular shape using a wooden scale and 'hamlar' which is a bamboo sliver with tapered edge. At regular interval, powdered rocks are sprinkled on the wooden plank to avoid the paste being glued to the plank while pounding it with the hand. This rectangular shaped paste is then made into a hollow cylindrical shape by rolling it along with a cylindrical object and is then placed on top of the round base which was already placed on the 'ham tatan'. The two ends of the hollow cylindrical shaped paste are joined by pressing with fingers and its lower end is connected with the round base by doing the same. After the ends are joined together, it can be seen that the paste is strong enough for the pot to stand vertically even at this stage without any external support. And hence getting the right composition of the paste is a must for the potters.

The pot placed on the 'ham tatan' is then kept on a wooden stand of about 2-3 feet and is wiped with a wet cloth to smoothen the surface. The damp surface is then beaten with 'hamkapi' which is a flat paddled wooden tool wrapped in thin cords of net prepared from extracting the fibers of a wild creeper called Manourul. While beating it with 'hamkapi', it is important for the other palm to slowly press the pot from inside to give shape to the pot. Great dexterity is required as the internal pressure and external movement must be well co-ordinated to produce a perfect pot. Potters had to walk round the wooden stand in this process to create the desired shape. The 'hamkapi' is occasionally dipped in water in order to make the desired shape of the pot more easily. After beating it with 'hamkapi', the cord mark of 'hamkapi' is scraped off with 'hamlear', giving the pot a smooth surface. The combined use of 'hamkapi' and 'hamlear' in this stage is crucial for potters to create pots of their desired shape and keeping the surface smooth and crack-



free. This process of shaping the pot and smoothening it takes about 20-60 minutes depending on the size and the kind of pot along with the variance in skills among the potters.

The base of the pot is then wrapped with damp polythene to retain its moisture so that the pot will not turn hard before the actual completion and is then kept overnight. The next day, the polythene wrapped around the base is carefully removed and potters tries to turn the flat base into a protruding rounded base. In this process, a round gourd called 'Shon', is used to give shape to the base. The 'Shon' being rounded in its shape is pressed against the pot from the inside while the exterior is beaten with 'Hamkapi'. The 'Hamlear' is used together with the 'Hamkapi' as earlier, to complete the back-breaking pottery making process.

#### **(d) Drying the pots:**

The completed pot is placed in the Sun to dry and the dried pots are then kept overnight near the fire hearth. This marks the first trial for the purity of the rocks and the soil as pots made with impure contents usually develop cracks and fissures at this stage. The pots are then kept in "Phungsher", a shelf just above the fire place made out of hand woven bamboo, for 4 to 5 days again until it became bone-dry and ready for bisque firing. . The process of drying caused a change in its moisture content and consequently the color of the pots changed from dull black to pale brownish color.

#### **(e) Firing it in wooden bonfire\**

After the drying process is completed, the pots are packed in 'Sopkai' and taken to the forest for firing. The firing process is essential for the pots as it harden the wares giving the pots the required maturity and affect the colors of the pots. The pots are fired at an approximate temperature of around 1100 degrees centigrade.

Figure 11:





Figure 12

Although woods of different variety can be used, Longpi potters usually prefer pine woods as they are easily flammable and the heat produced doesn't last to the detriment of the pots. Fire logs are arranged in a rectangular position and the pots are laid lined on the logs. The logs are then piled up only on the sides to avoid the logs from crushing the pots. After reaching a certain height, just above the height of the pots placed, logs are placed in between the side logs and arranged on top of the pots without direct contact to them. Once the logs are piled up enough to completely cover the pots, the logs are lit up from below. While the logs burn, tree branches are placed on the sides and on top in order to keep the fire burning within and to retain the heat inside. This tedious arrangement of fire wood and tree leaves gives it a functional resemblance to a kiln.

The heat from the huge fire made it difficult for potters during noon, and hence the ideal time for this process is in the evening or morning. . It is also crucial for potters to calculate the right amount of firewood required and the duration of the pots for firing as excessive heat and prolonged firing leads to cracks and breakage of pots. With the firewood completely burnt, the red hot pots are taken out from the charred pyre with the help of a long pole, and is immediately buried in a pile of saw dust or rubbed with green leaves of 'Machi tangni', a species of quercus tree. This gives lustre to the pots which is now greyish black in color. Once the whole process is completed, potters slowly beat the rim of the pots with a wooden stick to assess his finished products. Great attention is given to the resultant sound as they could, with that sound, ascertain cracks too imperceptible for the eye. The tedious process is now finally completed and the pots are now ready to use.





*Figur13: finished product ready for the market*

### **Implementation of the project**

The traditional Longpi pottery has been part and parcel of the Longpi people in particular and the Tangkhul Naga tribes in general for ages. The continuing traditional craftsmanship of the community has been disturbed by the force of the market, which introduces the cheaper machine made product in the locality among many other forces. It becomes the threat for the survival for the struggling craftsmen. The younger generations has lost interest in the traditional pottery making as it is no longer a lucrative activity. To draw the attention of the younger people for this dying art and to create an atmosphere where young people can pick up this art:

1. One day children pottery making event will be organised, where children can come and play with the clay, no artistic skills required just relax, play with the clay and get creative!
2. This will be followed by more systematic creative pottery making workshop.
3. To ensure the continuity of creativity and to hand down the art of this craftsmanship to the next generation it is important to set up a permanent centre where young people can come and learn in their leisure time.

### **Challenges:**

Longpi hampai has remained as the ideal cooking ware for certain delicacies amongst the Tangkhuls. With the fruits of industrialization slowly permeating the remote corners of North East India, traditional crafts of Longpi pottery now face its toughest battle for survival. In the words of Mikying Sharon, an 84 year old erstwhile potter, “Longpi pottery has seen three stages of evolution”. Longpi pottery crafts in ancient times was passed down from the father to the sons and was initially a family affair, as most family make their own pots. The second stage denotes the peak of Longpi pottery, and involves commercialization of Longpi pots



starting from barter trade to pottery becoming an income generating profession. The third stage, according to Mikying is “the present stage where the crafts is in serious threat of extinction due to the low returns of pottery and the availability of government schemes like MGNREGS, which has provided new avenues for income generation”. The dwindling of the raw materials is today one of the chief concerns of the Longpi potters as they believed it to be found only in ‘Sala’ and ‘kaphungram’. A need for government intervention along with its expertise is therefore necessary to discover new sites where the required raw materials are available.

The continued use of the traditional tools demands great amount of labor in the overall process and it has disenchanted the younger generations from learning the crafts as many other occupations demands lesser labor input yet generate more income. The onerous task of grinding rock blocks into fine powder by hand has not seen any change either. Availability of modern equipment such as stone crusher, modern kiln, etc. will immensely benefit the potters as it would reduce the labor intensity in the crafts.

One of the greatest challenges in Longpi pottery crafts today according to Shilp Guru awardee, Mr. Machihan Sasa is the “lack of a well-established market for Longpi pots. And because of this, potters resort to door-to-door selling in towns and cities. In doing so, the profits a potter made is cancelled out by the number of working days he actually lost in selling the pots”.

Chinaochung Sharon, another potter bemoans the “easy availability of other kitchen wares, specifically aluminum wares”. The industrial production of other kitchen wares with its superior durability has given an unfair competition to the manmade traditional Longpi pottery crafts.

## **Conclusion**

Longpi traditional pottery crafts has for long survived the test of time. The age-old conundrum of industrial goods replacing man-made crafts is evident in the case of Longpi traditional black pottery crafts as well. This fight for survival has effected some changes in Longpi pottery in recent years. It has brought about transformation of the pots, from basic cooking ware to variation in products and designs, more in tuned with the market demands. Creative new products such as flower vase, kettle, coffee mugs, tray, etc. with pacing of fine cane are now added to extend the product range as well as to embellish Longpi pottery crafts. Some younger generation potters like Simeon Luiram have started to imbibe modern technology in the traditional crafts, by using the aid of a stone crusher and wooden crates with enhanced safety for the packaging of the pots. However, the tools and processes still remain unchanged for the vast majority of potters. Machihan Sasa considers himself lucky to have been recognized by the Government of India as he compared and contrasted his life before and after such recognitions. Government’s intervention in Longpi pottery crafts is however limited to felicitating individual potters as nothing worth notable has been done for the promotion and preservation of the craft. A collective realization and acknowledgement of the threat Longpi pottery craft faces today is necessary to facilitate in ushering a new era for Longpi pottery. This is an art that should be celebrated and its proponents should not be left to fend off for it by themselves.