Traditional Method Of Preparing Tattoo Pigment by the Konyak Tribe of Mon District In Nagaland, India.

Zenwang Konyak

Department of Botany. Nagaland University Lumami, India.

Abstract: This paper deals with the use of *Strobilanthes penstemonoides* leaf extract and other materials for tattooing by Konyak tribe in Mon district of Nagaland. The plants were collected from Yannu village in Tizit area of Mon district. In olden days Konyak tribe were known to practice Headhunting and was rewarded through tattoos on their face and body. The pigment for tattoo is made from the leaves of *Strobilanthes penstemonoides* belonging to family Acanthaceae and exudates of *Canarium strictum* which belongs to family Burseraceae. Spine of *Calamus* species are used as tattooing needle.

Key-words: Konyak Tribe, Mon, Tattoo, Nagaland.

Introduction

Tattooing is a permanent marking on person's skin by pricking with Tattoo pigments [9]. Tattoo practices have been preserved in a number of ancient cultures, either through literary evidence, mummified remains or archaeological artifacts [3]. It has a significant role in the culture of Konyak Naga tradition. Konyaks are the major tribe inhabitant in Mon District of Nagaland. The origin of tattooing among Konyaks started during headhunting days where an orphan was punished by tattooing with black marks on his face, however the boy grew up looking more attractive and was admired by others and this soon became permanent culture [6]. Tattoos in Konyak society symbolizes the rank of a person in the society as it is given to Kings, prince, warriors and also to women when they reach certain stage. Each tattoo pattern is unique for different group of people and symbolizes different meanings [6]. Konyaks are widely known as the headhunters, headhunting was the highest profession in the Konyak society [7]. In their old tradition they take enemy's head during war, this allows them to decorate their face and body with tattoos as a sign of reward [2].

The leaves of *Strobilanthes penstemonoides* are mostly used as tattooing ink, as it gives dark greenish fluid on crushing, which is mixed with the soot of *Canarium strictum* exudates. Chemically, tattoo pigments are divided into organic and inorganic substances [5].

Materials and Methods

The plant *Strobilanthes penstemonoides* was collected in the month of December 2019 and was identified by Dr. Moaakum Asst. Professor Dept. of Botany, Kohima Science College. The plants were mostly found in colder villages of the district. The study was done in Yannu Village of Tizit area and is located 20 km from Tizit Hq. The village lies on the coordinates 26°53'03.8"N 95°09'16.7"E.. On the Northeast side, it is bordered with Arunachal Pradesh, Northwest by Sivasagar district of Assam, and On the East with Myanmar.

Figure 1: Yannu Village, Tizit Mon Nagaland.

Process of making the pigment:

The first step is collecting the leaves of *Strobilanthes penstemonoides.* It can be collected during any seasons. Washing the leaf is not necessary but dirt, dust or unwanted materials are removed. The leaf is then exposed to fire for few seconds so that it becomes soft and easy for crushing in palm. Dark green juice is squeezed out from the leaf.

Secondly, the exudates of *Canarium strictum* called *'Ying'* were collected, for the experiment the exudates were collected from Nangtan Village in Tizit Mon. It is burned and quickly catches fire, and then it is partially covered with an earthen pot so that the soot gets trapped and accumulates at the base. Then, the soot is collected in banana leaf; the pigment is prepared by mixing and stirring the soot with the leaf juice in 1:1 ratio. The color turns dark green on mixing. To extract 10ml of leaf juice, around 100-200gm of leaves was crushed and is enough for tattooing on the face alone.

Collecting the leaves ⟶ ***Exposure in fire*** ⟶ ***Crushing & Squeezing*** ⟶ ***Exudates soot Collection*** ⟶ ***Mixing & Stirring***

Figure 2: Leaves of *Strobilanthes penstemonoides.*

Figure 3: Exposing in fire.

Figure 4: Extracting the Juice.

Figure 5: Extracted Juice.

Figure 6: Soot accumulated at the base of earthen pot.

Figure 7: Exudates of *Canarium strictum*.

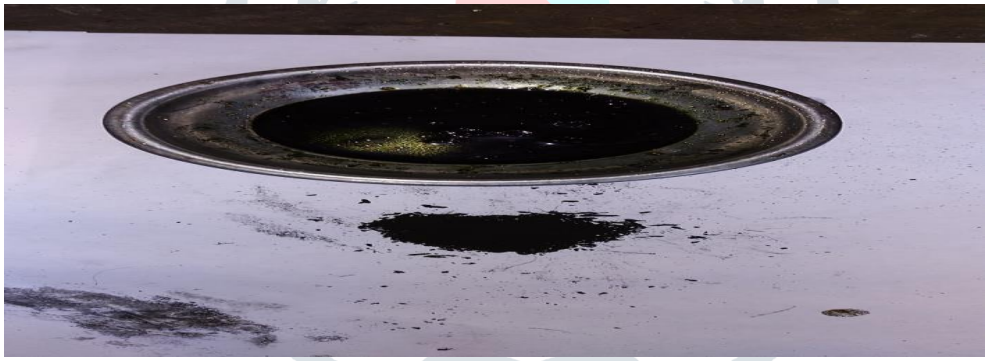

Figure 8: Exudates Soot and leaf Juice in bowl

Technique of Tattooing:

After the preparation of the pigment, the tattoo design is marked on the face or body, this method is called '*Lamlo Tapsa*' where the king draws the pattern of tattoo on the warrior's face. Thorns of *Calamus* spp. are used as tattooing needle because of its sharpness, strength and rigidity (Figure 9). However, tattooing is done by queen only as it is associated with customary laws. Tattooing is done with hand or sometimes with tattooing tool called '*Thongkoa*' which has the thorn impaled to the Stem (Figure 10). It has two important parts, i) The Tip called '*Sihuh*' (spines of *Calamus* spp.) Mostly *C. rotang* and *C. ciliaris* and ii) stem called *'Poakoa'* (Soft Midrib of *Cryota* spp.) mostly *C. mitis, C. obtusa,* which is used as handle for tapping.

This traditional tool is 15-20 cm in length having thickness of about 1-2cm; thorn length is about 3-5cm. The thorn impaled out from the stem is about 0.5-1cm. This is done so that it can have the maximum depth to the skin even at the unstable pressure of tapping. The tip is then dipped in the ink and tapped slowly with a piece of wood at the base. There can be multiple thorns at a time (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Thorns of *Calamus rotang* .

Figure 10: Tattooing tool *'Thongkoa'*.

Figure 11: A tattooed King.

Beliefs and ideas:

During tattooing, the bowl containing the pigment is placed on the person's chest and it is believed that if the bowl falls, the person won't live long or will be killed during battle. There is also another belief by the Konyaks that the quantity of accumulation of soot while burning the exudates of *Canarium strictum* signifies the person's personal life. It takes whole day for tattooing and is concluded with a celebration.

Conclusion

There has been a very limited knowledge to estimate from where tattoo actually originated, since it is practiced by different group of people around the world [1]. However, the first tattooed man was believed to be an ice man, carbon dating has estimated it to be around 5,300 years old [4][8][9]. The origin of tattoos among Konyaks could not be confirmed due to limited amount of documentation. Tattoo is practiced in almost every Konyak villages and the designs imparted could differ in different villages however the process of making the tattoo pigment is similar for all the Konyaks. Some Konyaks use only the soot as a tattoo pigment while majority use the combination of plant juice with soot. It is important to use earthen pots to accumulate the soot of the exudates as it easily and quickly gets attached to the base of the pot. The use of *Strobilanthes penstemonoides* leaves as the source of tattoo pigment is fascinating, as it reflects the knowledge about a plant by the people. The fluid is also used for writing and for art works on stone. The fluid is difficult to remove as it comes in contact with the skin and it takes several days to weeks. Another important use is the smoke of exudates from *Canarium strictum* on burning releases aroma that are effective against mosquitoes and act as

mosquitoes repellant. At the apical region of '*Thongkoa*' a traditional tapping tool, a small portion of hard stem was removed to provide easy penetration of the thorns.

Traditional tattooing among Konyaks is no more practiced after coming of Christianity. The impact of modernization among younger Konyak generation has adapted to the taste of modern lifestyle. Headhunting is no more practiced, the Konyaks has diverted to more peaceful ways of life. As per the verbal documentation, the face of the ones who gets tattooed is swollen but there are no records that the pigment has caused any abnormalities to the skin. Hence, this traditional tattooing and tattoo pigment can have an impact to the world of Tattooing.

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