

# **Pangden: Sherpa Women and Marriage**

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## **Introduction**

Every piece of clothing has its own story behind it. The journey a cloth makes, that we are unaware of, is not limited to a single culture and geographical location. Clothing conveys a message without having to speak for it. The clothing piece we will focus in this paper is, Pangden. A pangden is more than just a mere piece of clothing. It's a traditional way of determining your gender and marital status without having to explain it. However, like many other old tradition and culture, pangden has had gone through some cultural reconstruction by the newer generation.

In this paper, we will be observing pangden up close and through the interviews of woman who wear it. We will also discuss the pangden and its background, the journey it has had since its manufacturing in Lhasa, Tibet, to across the globe, in my closet in New York, USA. We will also compare the Pangden with the Head adornments women in Rupea, Romania wears as a sign of being married. The main take away will be focused on the relationship it has with the wearer's group Identity and who it is passed down to.

## **Background**

Pangden is part of traditional dress for women. It is rectangular piece of weaved colorful cloth stitched together to a longer piece of fabric so you can tie it around your waist. It appears to look like a half apron but serves a very different purpose. The pangden I'll be talking about in this paper, is a hand down from my mom and holds a significance in my wardrobe.

Although traditionally made with wool, my pangden is one of the more recent ones, made from cotton and silk with some other materials mixed. In Sherpa Cultural, it serves as a way of identifying a married woman. However, in more recent times, woman also use it as a fashion statement (Sherpa, Nyima).

The materials used in pangden tells us about the geography of the people who wear it. Traditionally made from wool, it is designed to keep you warm while layered on top of the bakhu which is usually made from wool as well. To break down other use of Pangden besides an attire for traditional clothing. they are practical as well as ornamental. It functions as so many different things in the home and field work. The pangden provide warmth, a ready cloth for picking up hot pans from the fire or wiping clean her baby's face, as well as a place to secure items like her sewing needle or flint.

The pangden also reflects the beautiful aesthetics of the places these women live. The snow white, the flowery reds and purples, the turquoise blue, and the deep tones of green, indigo, and black all provide a glimpse into the majesty of this part of the world. Pangden is mainly produced in Tibet with an apron-producing history of about 600 years. Almost every household in the town weaves woolen aprons, which is not only popular on the domestic market, but are also sold in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Western European countries. All this other consumer countries usually comes from the population of Tibetan people who lives across the world today. The reason for wearing pangden among Tibetan women varies according to the respective region they belong to. Some wear symbolizes their marriage, while others wear it at a certain age to signify entering adulthood.

Despite its origin from Tibet, Sherpa people in the northeastern part of Nepal, wear it too. the Sherpas were once from Tibet, themselves. "Sharwa" meaning "people from the east" turned to Sherpa but continued to follow part of the tradition that came along with them in the new lands of Himalayas. The clothing went through some changes but the "Pangden" remained the same.

## **Analysis**

The pangden we are observing has gone through some lengthy geographical journey since its manufacturing. As far as I could trace, I got it from my mom, while she got it as a gift from her elder sister who resides in Thingri, Tibet.

The observation I made in this short journey of pangden is that it is passed down from a female line. This goes mostly for any exchange of pangden among the members in the community. In my interview with Chiing Doma Sherpa, a married woman, she states "Pangden by general rule is a women's attire, especially in the Sherpa community. And historically it has been used to symbolize if a woman is married or not." This justifies that pangden has been used to showcase the marital status of women since the olden times.

But things have changed since then and more and more young generation wear a pangden as a fashion statement rather than to symbolize marital status. Moving towards the younger generations take on pangden, I interviewed, Nyima Phuti Sherpa, who said, "The Bakhu by itself looks like a blank canvas, and the pangden makes it look complete." If we investigate, any kind of festival that happens today, we can vividly see that the consumption of pangden starts off even as young as children. It is to be remembered that these kids are being dressed by the more recent generation of mothers.

As we can examine, the younger generation including myself wear it even when we are not married. Personally, pangden to me is an important piece in my traditional clothing since it is so colorful and upgrades the whole look. It is more of an accessory that compliments my other part of dress, the blouse, Honju. Going back to the one specific pangden that was passed down, it consists of more toned-down colors for everyday use. When asked why I was handed down a pangden even when I'm not married, my mom justified it with the fact that, she acknowledged me as a grown woman when I finished my high school and ventured to a new country across the globe for my bachelors. This might come off odd to people who are not familiar with the context, but the common marriage age up until my mom's generation was in the teenage years.

### **Pangden and Fashion**

Today, when we think about fashion, Paris, Milan, New York are the initial location we think of. But if we rethink it, the fresh and new design for upcoming season are mainly dictated by the western world. However, fashion and its importance are not the same around the world.

Fashion can be on different scale, from a single culture, a country to worldwide. In this case, the pangden is rather a very specific object. It is only of interest within a community that wears bakhu, i.e. Sherpas, Tibetans etc. And even within this community not everyone sees the fashion aspect in pangden, mostly the older generation. "Georg Simmel investigates distinctly clothing and fashion, even though he underlines that both clothing options and the fashion phenomenon are the result of an interaction among opposing forces." (Sorea 104). We can assume that the Pangden became more of an accessory to the younger generation who is more influenced by the global fashion and culture. This phenomenon can be understood as a cross culture between generation who are influenced by global fashion and incorporate it in their traditional clothing.

One time while attending a wedding for my youngest uncle, I was in my traditional dress, bakhu with a pangden on. An older lady from my aunt-to-be's side approached me and said, "what a young bride I was". Obviously, me being 17 at the time told her that I wasn't married. She had naturally assumed I was married due to the fact I was wearing a Pangden. This incident is a perfect example of how older generation think of pangden and how it has changed amongst the younger one.

### **Conclusion**

During the research period, I learned that there is more than just a piece of fabric behind Pangden. It is more than just various colors of stripes. My take on pangden changed in some major ways. The involvement of fashion in traditional clothing and how it is shaping the use of pangden today was an eye-opener. One interesting find was how traditional clothing and its significance is changing with younger generation. Also, through the interview, I got to connect to my mother throughout the process and understand what wearing a pangden meant for her. I was fascinated to find that while she herself wears it to signify marriage, she doesn't feel that it's necessary for one to be married to adorn a pangden. Furthermore, I have become more curious of social relationship I have with my traditional clothing and the story behind them that usually doesn't unfold itself unless we dig deep into it.

## Works Cited

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