

# Job's Tears: A Natural Bead in Textiles of Mainland Southeast Asia

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## Section 1: Introduction

In mainland Southeast Asia, many ethnic groups weave their textiles as one of their subsistence activities. These textiles are used for everyday life, such as sleeping items, towels, ritual items and clothing. Thus, textiles and costumes in this region are admired for the quality of their local materials (often hand-reeled silk and hand-spun cotton) and craft techniques. They often feature elaborate embellishments and patterning, includ-



1 Job's tears plant (*Coix lacryma-jobi* var. *lacryma-jobi*) growing in a village (Luang Prabang, Laos, 2011).



2 Seeds as natural beads (Luang Namtha, Laos, 2007).

ing applique, embroidery, feathers, silver or other metals, plastic beads and natural beads.

In this article, we focus on natural beads, specifically Job's tears, to demonstrate how ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia have used the seeds to decorate their costumes. We hope to propose a unique perspective for evaluating textiles and costumes in this geographical region and to demonstrate the interdependence of material culture, plants and natural environment.

## Section 2: Job's tears, a source plant of natural beads

Job's tears (*Coix* species, *Gramineae*) plants are tall grasses which, with the shape of their stems and leaves, resemble corn plants (figure 1). They usually are found in natural habitats on river edges or in swamps and also grow as a weed in open spaces or along roads in villages.

Job's tears develop male and female flowers on each individual plant. By examining these male and female flowers, botanical classification was adapted for Job's tears which recognize four species and three varieties of wild plants and one variety of cereal crop plant. All of these wild species and varieties can be found from northeast India to mainland Southeast Asia and to New Guinea Island. Thus, the plant diversity of Job's tears is highly concentrated in this region. On the other hand, only one variety of Job's tears, *Coix lacryma-jobi* var. *lacryma-jobi*, is widespread throughout the tropics and subtropics of the world, including Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Oceania, and North and South America.

The female flowers of all the wild Job's tears plants develop into a seed during the maturing season, (in the case of mainland Southeast Asia, October to December). People gather the hard-shelled fruits from the wild species and use them as beads for adornment (figure 2). These seeds have several distinctive characteristics which make them ideal for use as beads in costume and decoration:

1) Toughness: Even though they are gathered directly from nature, the seeds are tough enough to use as beads for many years. A hammer or stone is needed to crush them, and they do not get brittle with age.

2) Structure: The seed-shells are hard but naturally have a hole running through their center. Thus, there is no need to drill a hole artificially in order to string the beads.

3) Beauty: The surface of the seeds has a beautiful gloss and sheen, similar to ceramics.

In addition to these three basic characteristics, a high variation in shape, size, and color of seeds can be observed exclusively in mainland Southeast Asia. They include:

- a teardrop shape (*Coix lacryma-jobi* var. *lacryma-jobi*),
- round and large (*Coix lacryma-jobi* var. *monilifer*),
- tube or bottle-shape (*Coix lacryma-jobi* var. *steno-carpa*), and
- round and small (*Coix pueruarum*).

The seeds can be small to large in size and black, grey, brown, beige, and white in color.

### Section 3: People and the natural beads

The most common way people use the beads is to make necklaces by connecting the seeds by thread. This



3 Akha jacket for wedding ceremony (Shan, Myanmar, 2006)



4 Seed decoration on the backside of the Akha jacket (Shan, Myanmar, 2006).



5 Karen blouse (Mae Hongsorn, Thailand, 2008).



6 Karen blouse (Bago, Myanmar, 2002)

method can be observed widely in areas where wild types of Job's tears plants are growing. Local people sometimes combine seeds of Job's tears plants with other bead materials such as stones, other kinds of seeds, seashells or plastic beads to produce distinctive styles.

On the other hand, when people in mainland Southeast Asia decorate costumes with the seeds, they usually adapt the stitching technique. The seeds are stitched onto a textile as a support and backdrop. The contrast between the glossy and smooth seeds and the rough cloth (usually indigo-dyed cotton), provides a striking three-dimensional effect.

This practice and culture of using Job's tears to decorate textiles can be observed in mainland Southeast Asia, Yunnan Province of China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. Specific examples from several ethnic groups in this region follow, these are based on field observation and interviews conducted over the past fifteen years by Dr. Ochiai.

#### Akha: Joy of variation

Akha women living in northern Thailand, northern Laos, eastern Myanmar and Yunnan Province use the seeds for decorating. The decorations are characterized by 1) using all four types of seeds with variation in the shape and size and 2) adapting the seeds for many articles of costume, such as headdresses, jackets, aprons, leg covers and shoulder bags. The seeds are artfully



7 Taungyo one-piece dress (Shan, Myanmar, 2005).

arranged on the surface of hand-spun and hand-woven cotton textiles with deep blue indigo dye. In order to harvest favorable varieties of seeds for decorating their clothing, in many villages Akha people grow Job's tears plants in home gardens and in alternating agriculture fields with other food crops.

A special jacket for wedding ceremonies can be observed in the Shan State of Myanmar (figure 3), Akha women select uniform grain-sized, pure white, completely unblemished seeds to stitch on the backside of the jacket using skillful combinations of patchwork and embroidery. Further, they also make unique hanging decorations with the seeds (figure 4). They break the bottle shaped seeds into two cup-shaped pieces which they then link in an overlapping scale-like pattern to create a chain.

#### Karen: Tube-shape preference

Karen women in northern Thailand and central and eastern Myanmar adjust their clothing according to their



8 Palaung headdress (Shan, Myanmar, 2003).

life stage. During girlhood, they wear one-piece dresses of white cotton. After marriage, they wear tunic blouses of blue or black color with red tube skirts. They carefully plan out a pattern and decorate the blouses by stitching tube-shaped seeds and using colorful threads (figure 5). This is the only type of decoration they create on their clothing and so is the primary way that they demonstrate their skill at handiwork and pride in their creative designs (figure 6).

Just as do the Akha people, the Karen grow the Job's tears plants in their home gardens and in alternating agriculture fields to harvest the seed. During the repetitive process of sewing and harvesting the seed, different types of the tube-shaped seeds are selected and separated. For example, a Karen household observed in the Mae Hongsorn Province of Thailand reserved three types of seed: long, medium and short, which could be used for different designs and parts of designs. This goes for color as well—Karen people in Thailand prefer white seeds, while the Karen of Myanmar use white and beige seeds. The meticulousness and specificity in selection of seed shape, size, and color-selection indicates the degree to which these ethnic groups value the seed for its intricacy and take pride in their textiles.

Tube-shaped white seeds are also favored by other ethnic groups: Taungyo women in the southern Shan



9 Jinghpaw shoulder bag (Kachin, Myanmar, 2005).

State of Myanmar (figure 7) for one-piece dress decoration, Palaung women in the northern Shan State (figure 8) for headdress decoration, Jingphaw people (figure 9) in the Kachin State of Myanmar, and Wa people (figure 10) of the Shan State of Myanmar for shoulder bag decoration.

#### Chin: Appearance and sound of seeds

In the Chin State of western Myanmar, Chin villages are scattered over the high mountains. As a result of the hills and valleys separating them from each other, there are more than 40 sub-groups with different languages and customs. They are known as skillful weavers who make textiles of various supplementary weft patterns by using back strap looms. Moreover, they use the seeds to decorate clothing for special occasions.

Haka Chin women decorate their tube skirts with two types of seeds, teardrop and tube. They connect the seeds and metal tubes with threads to make strings and then hang the strings down around the waist (figure 11). Meanwhile, Falam Chin women wear a striking crown-like headdress made with the strings of seeds, porcupine quills and bird feathers (figure 12). They wear these skirts or headdresses to participate in harvest

festivals and wedding ceremonies. With the hanging strings of seeds, when they dance they can create an eye-catching embellishment as well as a pleasing sound as the seeds knock against one another.

#### Naga: People gathering for the festival

The Naga people live in the mountainous border areas ranging from northeastern India to northwestern Myanmar. Similar to the Chin people, the Naga people are composed of nearly 50 sub-groups with different languages and customs.

In 2006, Dr. Ochiai visited a New Year festival in Sagain Division. It was a prime occasion to meet Naga men in full costume for this special event. They use teardrop and tube-shaped seeds collected from the wild as one of their decorative natural materials.

Tangkhul Naga men wear huge headdresses made of rattan and wood to which they attach many kinds of items such as white tube-shaped seeds, red jequirity seeds and black bear hair, gold metal disks and black and white hornbill feathers (figure 13). Makuri Naga men adapted teardrop or tube-shaped white seeds for covering the surface of leather belts (figure 14). By employing the seeds, the belt could be effectively used as

protective gear, and also as a symbolic item to indicate their unity and nobility. Further, teardrop or tube-shaped white seeds are stitched on the large sized shawls and sashes (figure 15). In the case of the Naga people, they also use cowrie shells for the decoration. When comparing these two natural materials, the cowrie shells are evaluated as a rare and treasured item that travelled great distances from the seashore while Job's tears seeds are recognized as a local and common item found in the surrounding environment.

#### Section 4: Past and present

The people of mainland Southeast Asia widely utilize the seeds of the Job's tear plant for decorating costumes. This demonstrates the tradition of using natural materials to decorate costume in the region, a tradition made possible by a deep local knowledge of the environment and an ability to manipulate agricultural techniques to cultivate specific varieties of the seed.

In 1997, when Dr. Ochiai first began researching Job's tears and the use of these seeds in costume decoration, she was struck by the beauty, intricacy, and pervasiveness of the practice, and how it demonstrated a strong dependence of culture on nature. She had many opportunities to meet and interview people who



10 Wa woman stitching the seeds on a shoulder bag (Shan, Myanmar, 2006).

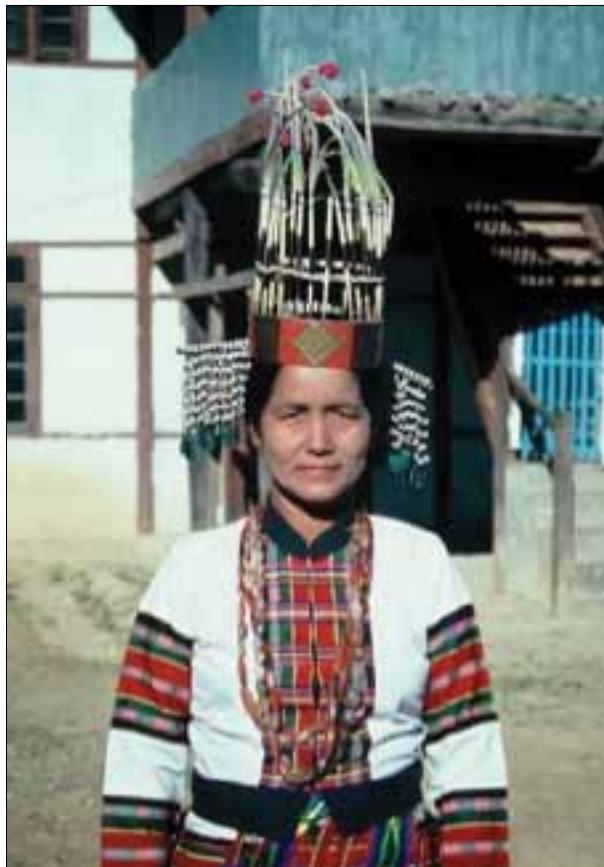


11 Haka Chin skirt (Yangon, Myanmar, 2006).

made, wore, and used the seed bead items. However, in recent years it has no longer been easy.

For example, the Jinghpaw shoulder bag was traditionally stitched with vertical white colored tube-shaped seeds on the bottom corners. Nowadays, one finds the shoulder bags with white lines of thread in place of the white seeds. This is due to the difficulty of harvesting the seeds in the alternating agriculture fields with communities displaced during conflict and with many living as refugees over decades. However, the Jinghpaw people believe the bag symbolizes the torso of a human and the tube-shaped seeds represent its legs. As the legs are a necessary part of the body, white thread must be used as a substitute in the absence of the seeds. This is a good example of how the seeds were traditionally significant but have been supplanted by a more accessible material.

Similarly, the decorative material of Taungyo one-piece dresses has changed from the seed into plastic beads and sequins which are arranged prominently around the neck. In the local context, the Job's tears were an accepted traditional material for dressmaking. However, when the Taungyo attended national events in the capital of Myanmar, their costume was compared

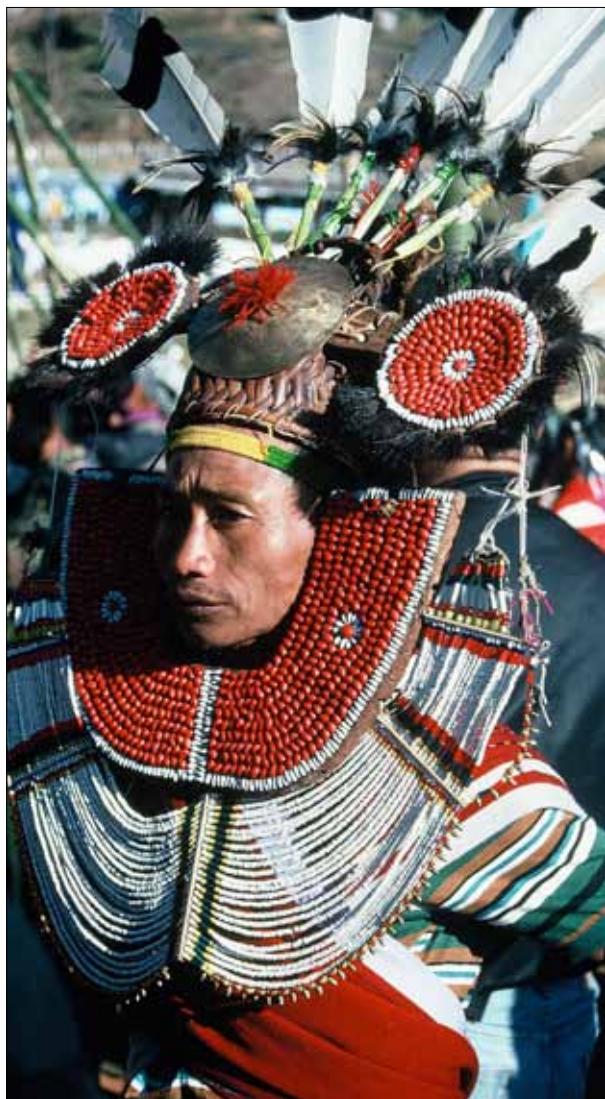


12 Falam Chin woman with her headdress (Chin, Myanmar, 2006).

with that of many other ethnic minorities. This spurred them to adopt much more colorful and eye-catching materials rather than the simple seeds. Thus, the introduction of visual comparisons coupled with national pride have affected the material and the design of the ethnic costumes in this multiethnic nation.

It is also very common now that natural Job's tears beads are replaced by artificial beads from the markets. In this case, the seeds were simply identified as an item of decoration and beauty, with no representational significance. Thus, it is not difficult to start using plastic beads, which are numerous, easy to acquire, inexpensive, and come in a variety of shapes and colors. They also can signal the user or wearer's adaptation to modernity and urban life, rather than the natural bead from the countryside.

Textiles, not just the seed beads, have been changing drastically. In the past, a number of different types



13 Tangkhul Naga heardess (Sagain, Myanmar, 2006).



14 Makuri Naga belt (Sagain, Myanmar, 2006).

of natural materials were gathered from the forests and fields, including cotton, vine, plant dyes and the seeds of Job's tears. Nowadays, these have been replaced by newly introduced materials from the markets, such as mass-produced machine-made textiles, chemical dyes, synthetic fibers and plastic beads.

The use of Job's tears beads in textiles are a unique indicator of the evolution of people and plant interactions in mainland southeast Asia and of the upheavals many ethnic minority communities are undergoing—resettlement of villages, integration into a market economy, commercial cultivation of single crops and erosion of cultural practices and customs. This is explored further in our upcoming exhibition called "Seeds of Culture: From Living Plants to Handicrafts" which will open on 13 September 2016 at the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, which combines our contemporary understanding of and concern with environmental degradation and its relationship to cultural homogenization and poverty among ethnic groups in developing countries.



15 Naga woman wearing a shawl (Sagain, Myanmar, 2006)

#### Authors

Dr. Yukino Ochiai, an ethnobotanist, Professor, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, Japan, conducted field research mainly in Laos, Thailand and Myanmar to examine the plant uses for everyday life. During this process, she focused on Job's tears, a grass plant group, and amassed a collection of items that use the seeds.

Tara Gujadur is the Co-director of the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang. She is producing the exhibition "Seeds of Culture: From Living Plants to Handicrafts" which is being guest curated by Dr. Ochiai. The exhibition will be up from September 2016 to August 2018.

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