

Singpho-Jinghpaw: How Textiles Transcend Borders

Anna-Louise Meynell

Impart + Nalli Fellowship 2024-25 (Cycle 1)

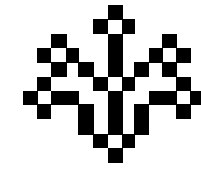


Cover Image: The Singpho
loin loom. Photograph:
Anna-Louise Meynell

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Introduction



Contemporary Singpho maka.
Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



Project Snapshot

Primary Research Locations

Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, United Kingdom

Research Focus

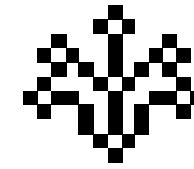
Textile heritage, border histories, cultural continuity, weaving traditions

Research Methods

Fieldwork, oral histories, archival research, photography, comparative textile analysis

Outcomes

Community archive and exhibition based on Singpho–Jinghpaw textile traditions, Published articles and an online lecture to disseminate the research findings



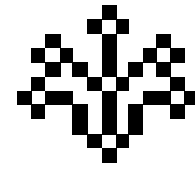
Project Overview

Anna-Louise Meynell was awarded the Impart + Nalli Fellowship in 2024. The Fellowship is offered through a collaboration between Nalli Silks — a heritage textile brand established in 1928 — and Impart, an online platform dedicated to developing accessible resources on South Asian art and cultural histories. Every year, the Fellowship supports two research projects on underexplored textile histories, practices, and traditions in South Asia. For the inaugural cycle in 2024–25, Fellows were selected through a rigorous assessment process that included reviewing more than 200 project proposals, followed by interviews with shortlisted applicants. The Jury and Advisory Committee comprised Annapurna Garimella, Manju Sara Rajan, Mayank Mansingh Kaul and Lavanya Nalli.

This research project explored the historical and cultural ties between the Singpho people of Northeast India and the Jinghpaw people of Myanmar through the shared techniques, uses, motifs, and meanings of their handwoven textiles. Despite contemporary geopolitical divisions between India, Myanmar, and China, these communities have common ethnic origins, social histories, and textile traditions.

The Singpho frame loom.
Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



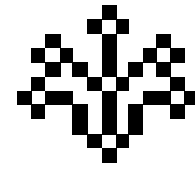


Singpho women wearing *bathut* and *ningwat*. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



The project examined how textiles communicate histories of migration, kinship, territory, and identity transcending political borders. Through the Fellowship period, researcher Anna-Louise Meynell travelled through villages and towns in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, visiting weavers' homes, local markets, and community spaces of the Singpho. She supplemented insights from this primary research with the archival study of museum collections in the United Kingdom, examining textile samples and documents gathered during the British colonial period.

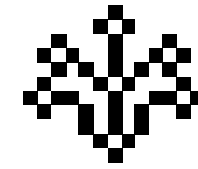
The research investigated what continuities remain visible between historical or archival textiles and contemporary weaving traditions. It also analysed how existing social, political, and economic conditions have shaped the evolution of textile production on both sides of the border. The research outcomes bring to light the significance of textiles — not only as material culture, but as living repositories of memory, cultural continuity, and social exchange.



About the Fellow

Anna-Louise Meynell is a textile designer, handloom consultant, and researcher based in Assam. For nearly two decades, she has worked across India and Southeast Asia, engaging with both industrial textile-design and grassroots handloom organisations. She also runs a weave studio and natural farm, which is evolving into a living archive of natural dye plants, silk cultivation, and the region's traditional textile practices.

The Singpho & Jinghpaw Communities: History & Region

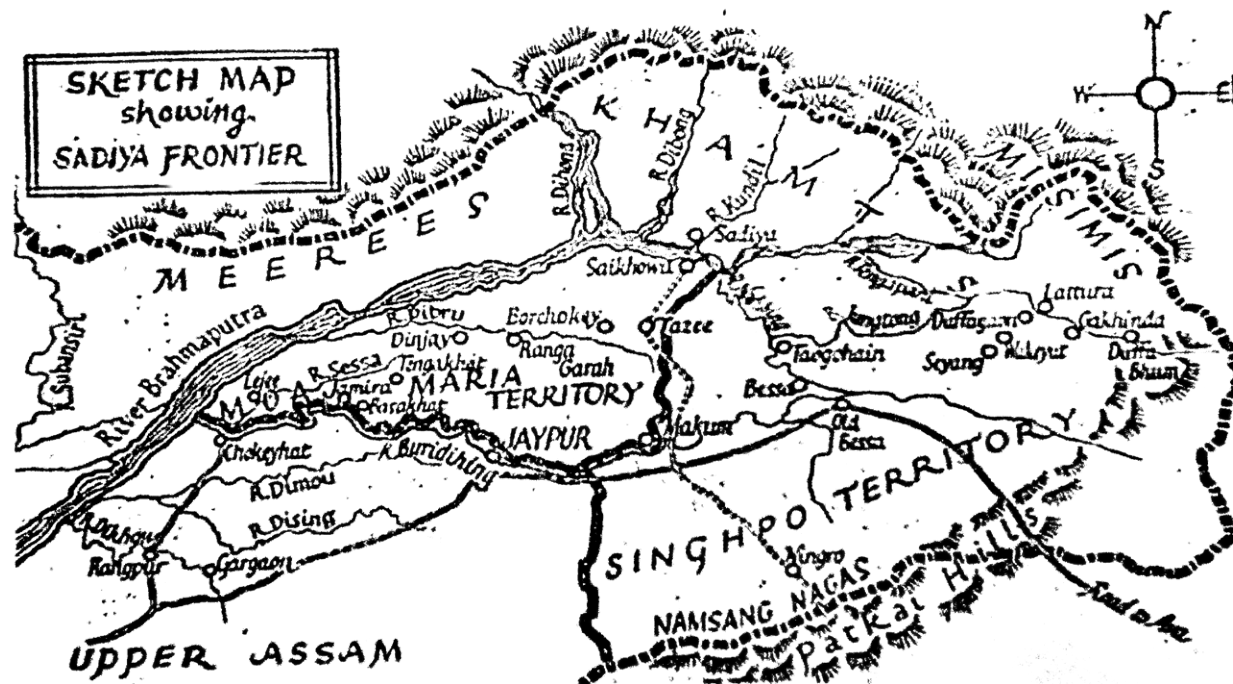


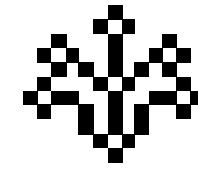
The Singpho of Northeast India are part of the wider Singpho–Jinghpaw–Jingpo ethnic community whose homelands extend across present-day eastern Arunachal Pradesh and upper Assam in India, Kachin State in Myanmar, and the Yunnan province in China. While contemporary political borders divide these populations, their shared histories, kinship networks, and cultural traditions have developed throughout a connected region, long before the creation of modern nation-states.

Oral traditions trace the origins of the Singpho–Jinghpaw people to Majai-Singra-Bum, a mountainous plateau believed to be near the glacial sources of the Irrawaddy, Mekong, Yangtze, and Salween rivers on the Tibetan plateau. Historical records identify the Jingpo as an established ethnic group in present-day Yunnan, China. During the 15th and 16th centuries, many migrated south to the Hukawng Valley in Myitkyina district of Kachin State in present-day Myanmar, and areas along the Burma border. Singpho settlements developed between the Chindwin river and the Patkai range, while Jinghpaw communities inhabited the Danai region of the Hukawng Valley, with the city of Myitkyina as a major centre.

The Patkai Hills formed a natural boundary between present-day Northeast India and Myanmar. From there, groups crossed into Northeast India through the Chongkham and Pangsau passes. Those arriving via Chongkham established communities in Chongkham, Miao, Phup, Pisi, Kagam, and Lewang in present-day Arunachal Pradesh, while the Pangsau Pass provided access to Assam's Brahmaputra Valley.

Colonial map of the Singpho region. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell





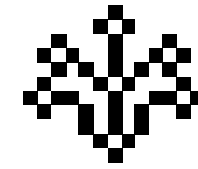
Looking towards the Patkai hills
and Myanmar. Photograph:
Anna-Louise Meynell



These movements were driven by population growth, the search for fertile land, and territorial expansion by Singpho and Jinghpaw chiefs. At present, the Singpho of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh trace their origins to the Hkakhu (“upper” or “from the highland areas”) subgroup of the wider Jinghpaw community of Kachin.

Over time, these migration routes became trade corridors connecting the communities. The Singpho occupied strategically important locations on either side of the Patkai mountain range and along these routes, becoming key intermediaries in trade between Assam, Burma, and China. Through these networks, goods such as jade, amber, Chinese silk, Burmese cloth, valuable metals, arms, medicinal plants, ivory and other commodities circulated in the region, fostering cultural and economic relations. From the 18th century onwards, Singpho communities became deeply involved in the shifting political landscape of the Northeast frontier, interacting with the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley, Burmese forces, and subsequently the British colonial administration. Despite nation-making efforts to impose borders, administrative systems, and territorial control during the colonial era and later, kinship ties and connections between Singpho, Jinghpaw, and Jingpo communities persisted across the region.

Research Questions



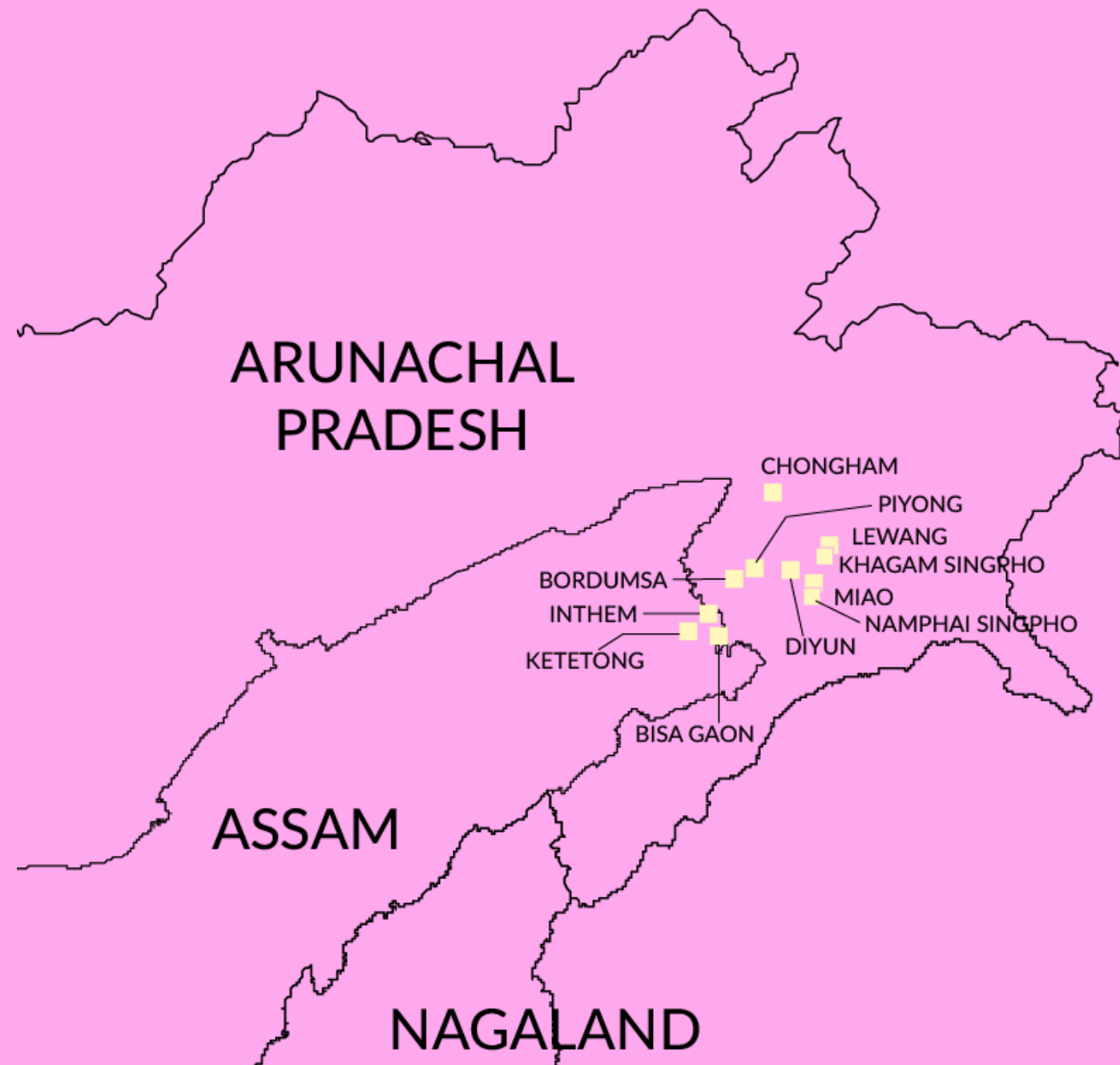
Contemporary Singpho maka.
Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



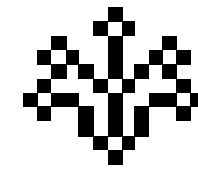
Through fieldwork, archival research, interviews, and visual documentation, the research traced enduring techniques and traditions as well as transformations within Singpho textile practices, and their relationship to Jinghpaw textile heritage. Since the focus of this research is the contemporary Singpho community in India, historical textiles from the late-19th to mid-20th century, identified with the Hkakhu Jinghpaw communities and found in colonial collections of Kachin textiles in the UK, provided an important point of comparison for understanding continuities in textile traditions. The project looked closely at how textiles play a role in maintaining cultural associations within the broader Singpho–Jinghpaw community today. This approach was informed by a few recurring questions:

- How do Singpho textiles communicate the early and recent histories of an ethnic group split by international borders?
- How do living textile practices transcend present-day geopolitical boundaries?
- What is the role of textiles in maintaining cultural ties between the Singpho and Jinghpaw communities?

Fieldwork Locations



Map showing the names and locations of villages in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, India, where fieldwork was carried out. Not to scale.



Primary Research

Arunachal Pradesh

Bordumsa, Miao, Namphai Singpho, Innau, Diyun, Lewang, Khagam Singpho, Piyong, Chongham

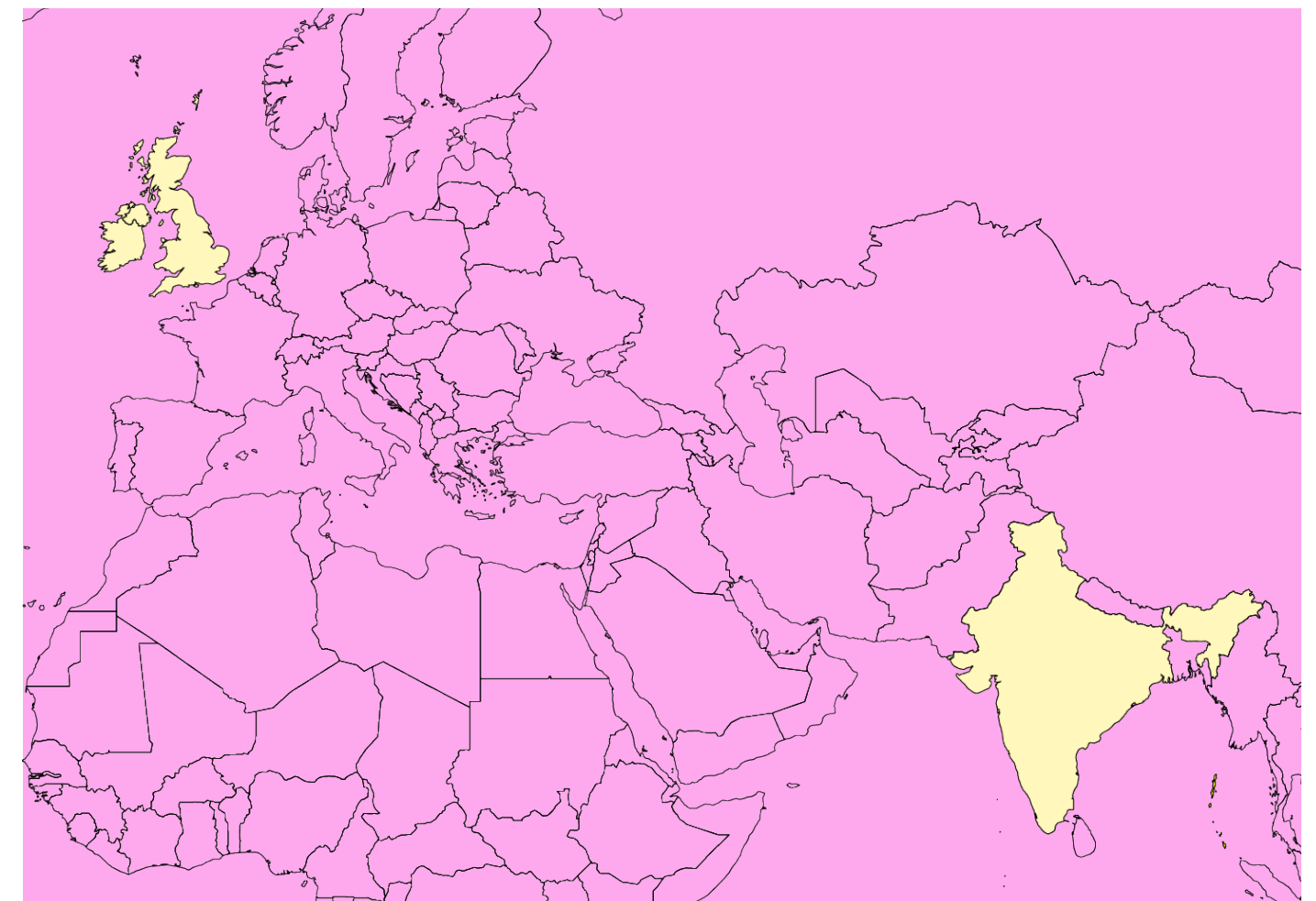
Assam

Ketetong, Bisa Gaon, Inthem

Secondary Research

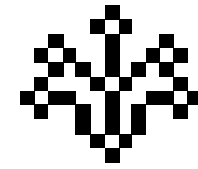
United Kingdom Archives

The British Museum, The Victoria and Albert Museum, Brighton & Hove Museum



Map showing the two countries where research work was conducted. Not to scale.

Research Methodology

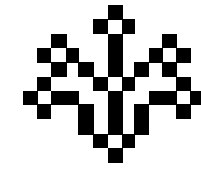


A woman weaving on a Singpho loom. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



- Fieldwork at 11 villages in Arunachal Pradesh and 3 villages in Assam where Singpho community members and weavers live
- Informal interviews and oral histories
- Photography and visual documentation of textiles, looms, raw materials and motifs
- Comparative analysis of contemporary and archival textiles
- Literature review and historical research
- Museum archive study

Research Journey



Phase 1

Lewang village, Arunachal Pradesh, India.
Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



Establishing Context and Community Connections

- Building relationships with the Singpho Development Society and Singpho Women's Organisation
- Reviewing literature on Singpho and Kachin histories, migration narratives and border histories
- Identifying Kachin collections in UK museums, and work undertaken by researchers in relation to these collections

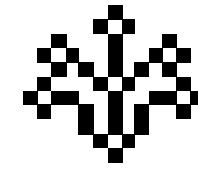
Phase 2

Fieldwork meeting in Lewang. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



Fieldwork and Textile Documentation

- Documenting traditional garments, weaving techniques, motif structures, looms and terminology in Singpho language
- Understanding informal cross-border textile trade
- Observing contemporary textile-production systems



Phase 3

Cotton Bag from the James Henry Green Collection; Kachin state, Myanmar. Brighton and Hove Museum, UK



Phase 4

Pinna with the Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh explaining her documentation of Singpho maka. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



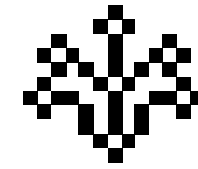
Archival Research and Comparative Analysis

- Visiting museum collections and archives in the UK
- Documenting parallels in garment forms; shared motif structures and terms; and similarities in colour palettes, fibres, and weaving techniques
- Recording motifs that are no longer woven
- Researching common textile heritage prior to the establishment of modern borders

Community Engagement and Public Dissemination

- Presenting an exhibition at the 2026 Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi in Miao, Arunachal Pradesh – the Singpho community's annual dance festival – to showcase photographs of colonial archival textiles, heirloom pieces held by Singpho families, contemporary Singpho textiles, and documentation of weaving processes and motifs
- Initiating community dialogue around textile heritage and preservation, and the significance of heirloom textiles and weaving knowledge
- Publishing an essay on Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi for *Perspectives*, Impart's digital publication

Research Findings

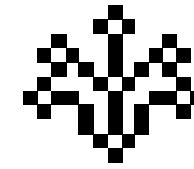


Examining Singpho bags of different ages, yarns and origin.
Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



The research findings demonstrate that contemporary understandings of Singpho history and identity are more complex than conventional historical narratives suggest. The research initially selected archival textiles documented as originating from Hkakhu Jinghpaw communities in Kachin for comparison with contemporary textiles produced by the Singpho communities. This provided a useful basis for tracing continuities between present-day Singpho textiles and historical examples from the wider Jinghpaw-Kachin-Singpho-Jingpo cultural region.

Discussions with community members, however, revealed a more layered concept of identity — one rooted less in ethnic subgroups than in the intricate Jinghpaw clan system. This suggested that the practice of classifying indigenous communities into fixed groups has its origins in colonial anthropology and survey practices, leaving little room for the complexities of lineage and inter-tribal marriage. As a result, the research shifted away from defining what is strictly Hkakhu and towards understanding the textile traditions of the contemporary Singpho community, while recognising their clear roots in Hkakhu culture.



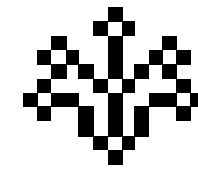
Maka names and interpretations. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell

The research also highlights how contemporary political borders do not fully reflect Singpho–Jinghpaw ideas of territory. Community narratives describe the wider Kachin-Singpho region as a shared cultural landscape that existed before the India–Myanmar border was drawn along the Patkai Hills. Many Singpho therefore view the movement of people from Myanmar to India as movement within a historically connected territory that was later divided by state boundaries, rather than simply as migration across an international border.

The study found strong similarities between textiles preserved in Kachin colonial archives and contemporary Singpho textiles in India, particularly heirloom pieces maintained by artisans. These similarities extend to garments, designs, colours, motifs, and even the terms used for motifs.

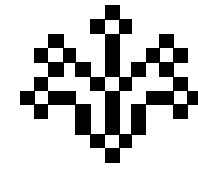


Top: Contemporary *bathung* with Singpho maka. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. **Bottom:** Hkakhu *bathung* from the James Henry Green collection; 1920, Brighton and Hove Museum, UK.



A key finding is the enduring importance of *maka* (motifs), which artisans consider the defining feature of Singpho textiles. While colours, fibres, and garment styles have evolved, geometric maka remain central to cultural identity and continue to appear in both historical and contemporary textiles. The study also identified a group of heritage motifs that are no longer commonly woven. Earlier found on heirloom bags, prayer cloths, and decorative belts, these more intricate figurative designs survive in family collections but have largely disappeared from contemporary production.

Changes in materials point to broader social and economic shifts. In Northeast India, limited industrial development and restricted access to raw materials, which influence cost and availability, have encouraged a shift from traditional fibres like cotton or silk, and natural dyes, to synthetic yarns and pre-dyed fibres. Weaving remains a part-time cultural activity, closely



Top left: Bag from the Kachin collection at the British Museum; Putao district, Kachin state, Burma; c.1850–1910; Cotton and wool; 87 x 26 cm. Trustees of the British Museum. **Top right:** Heirloom remnant of a bag with figurative motive; Lewang, Arunachal Pradesh. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. **Bottom:** Papay remnant woven by Beesa Roy of Modoi village; c. 1970s. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. The textiles share strikingly similar figurative motifs, including horses, cockfights and human figures.

tied to community life. In contrast, post-independence Myanmar saw a dedicated push towards commercial textile production. Myitkyina emerged as a major centre, and weaving increasingly became organised around workshop-based production, productivity, and wages. Contemporary socio-economic upheaval in Kachin has further reinforced this commercial orientation.

Despite these different trajectories, textiles continue to be exchanged across the border. Kachin textiles are sold in India through informal trade networks. Many Singpho purchase these for everyday wear while reserving their own handwoven textiles for special occasions. Likewise, Jinghpaw visitors attending the Shapawng Yawng festival in India often purchase Singpho textiles, creating an ongoing cultural exchange that reinforces a shared identity between the communities.

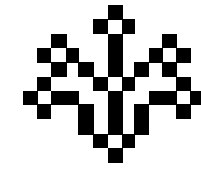
Top: Heirloom *ningwat*. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. **Bottom:** Contemporary *ningwat* woven with kong dung design. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. Variation in colour combinations reflect a shift in aesthetics and availability of dyes and pre-dyed yarns in the market.



Left: Young girls from Myanmar at the Shapawng Yawng festival. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. **Bottom:** Singpho women dressed in garments from Kachin at the Shapawng Yawng festival. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell.



Research Outcomes

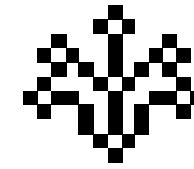


Legum Own Kho holding heirloom bag maka remnant. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell



Community Archive

A growing written and pictorial archive of Singpho–Jinghpaw textiles, garments, motifs (*maka*), weaving implements, and materials has been developed through extensive fieldwork, archival research, and close collaboration with Singpho community leaders, artisans, and women knowledge-holders. Documented in both English and Singpho, the archive brings together historical and contemporary wisdom, recording textile terminology, techniques, motifs, and material practices spanning different generations. Conceived as a resource for the communities, and reviewed by them, the document was shared with Singpho officials, local government, cultural organisations, and artisans. It is intended to support future research, documentation, and the long-term preservation of Singpho textile knowledge. The archive also complements the documentation of *maka* being undertaken by Pinna Kitnal Singpho as part of the Geographical Indication (GI) application for Singpho weaving.



Community Exhibition

Research findings were presented through an exhibition at the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi held during 13–15 February 2026, bringing together archival photographs from museum collections alongside photographs of heirloom textiles and contemporary Singpho textiles. Meant primarily for the Singpho community, the exhibition encouraged dialogue around historical textile traditions, the evolution of Singpho weaving practices, and the importance of sustaining textile knowledge.

The exhibition attracted visitors from the Singpho–Jinghpaw community, including festival attendees from India and Myanmar. It created opportunities for dialogue with visitors from Kachin regarding textile traditions, weaving practices, and contemporary production systems on the other side of the border. It was also visited by prominent community leaders and public figures – including the Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh; Ningru Jiaja and Beesa Gam, the Singpho chiefs from Namsai and Beesa Gaon villages; and members of the Singpho Development Society – all of whom recognised the significance of documenting and preserving Singpho material culture. The exhibition has since generated renewed interest within the community towards documenting and preserving traditional weaving skills, including discussions around establishing a museum and undertaking further research on Singpho textile heritage.

Festival Publication

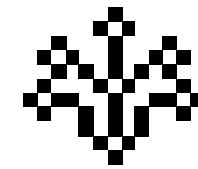
An article based on the research was published in the *Souvenir*, the annual journal of the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi.

Top: Singpho visitors to the exhibition in the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell.
Bottom: The textile exhibition at the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival in Miao, February 2026; Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell.



Ongoing and Future Outputs

Top: Singers and dancers in the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival ground. Photograph: Anna-Louise Meynell. **Bottom:** Sharing museum archive photographs with Beesa Roy.



Perspectives Essay published by Impart

A long-form article exploring the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi as a 'third space' for sustaining shared Singpho–Jinghpaw cultural identity, transcending contemporary national borders. Focusing on textiles, ritual, and community participation, the article examines how the festival enables the renewal of kinship networks and the continued practise of shared cultural traditions in India, Myanmar, and China.

Live Lecture hosted by Impart

An online lecture based on the Fellowship and its research outcomes, exploring how the textile traditions of the Singpho of Northeast India and the Jinghpaw of Myanmar reflect a shared cultural heritage that predates contemporary international borders.

Academic Publications

The research will be further developed into a series of scholarly publications, including a research paper on Singpho migrations, and articles for journals including *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Textiles Asia*, *Global InCH Journal*, and *Fashion Practice*.

Talks and Public Dissemination

The research will be shared through public lectures in the UK, on the textiles of Northeast India – both independently and in collaboration with organisations such as the Oxford Asian Textile Group (OATG), the Oriental Rug and Textile Society (ORTS), and The Textile Society. The researcher also intends to present the project at the annual symposium of The Highland Institute in Kohima, Nagaland.

Support



This research was conducted by **Anna-Louise Meynell** as part of the **Impart + Nalli Fellowship 2024–25**.

The Impart + Nalli Fellowships support research into underrepresented textile-related histories, practices, and traditions across South Asia.

The Fellowship is a collaboration between Nalli Silks — a heritage textile brand established in 1928 — and Impart, an online platform dedicated to developing accessible resources on South Asia’s art histories. Since its inception, the programme has supported two research projects annually.

Acknowledgements

Anna-Louise Meynell extends her gratitude to Jahumroy Singpho of Innao and Pinna Kitnal Singpho of Miao for their invaluable support, guidance, and generosity throughout the course of this research. Their willingness to accompany and assist with fieldwork, share their knowledge and experiences, and facilitate meaningful engagement with the Singpho community greatly enriched the project. She is especially grateful for their enthusiasm and commitment in collaborating on the exhibition presented at the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi in February 2026.

Learn More

To learn more about the research project *Singpho Jinghpaw: How Textiles Transcend Borders*, please contact Anna-Louise Meynell at info@annaloom.com

For any further information or inquiries, please write to us at specialprojects@imp-art.org



For information about the Impart + Nalli Fellowship and future opportunities, scan the QR code.