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Kouna Craft: A Unique Reed Craft from Manipur

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The state of Manipur which is located in the northeastern region of India is known for its vibrant traditions and exceptional handicrafts contributing to its rich cultural legacy. Among the various artistic treasures of the region, *Kouna* craft is a unique form of art and it has its roots in the traditional practices of the Manipuri people. '*Kouna*' is the local name for an aquatic reed or rush. As the art is based on these reeds, it came to be known as the *Kouna* craft. These long water reeds have great potential for large-scale cultivation, processing, and sale of various products crafted from these reeds including mats, baskets, handbags for women, and furniture. This traditional craft is popular among artisans due to the abundant availability of raw materials and high demand from both domestic and foreign customers. It provides a source of livelihood for the locals and employment opportunities for local craftsmen in Manipur.



Courtesy: Weaving dreams with *Kouna* (giskaa.com)

Kouna Reed

Origin and History

The *Kouna* craft has a rich heritage in Manipur, proceeding with the Meitei people who discovered that the *Kouna* reed growing in and around the marshy region of Loktak Lake could be used to create a variety of items. This art has been an integral part of their culture with the skills being down from generation to generation, thus, preserving the traditional wisdom and sustainable practices. It is culturally linked to the legendary sacred snake deity '*Nongda Lairen Pakhan*'

Kouna Reed:

The water rush or club rush, *Kouna*, is a perennial aquatic plant in the Cyperaceae family. It is commonly found in the wetlands in the valleys of Manipur, where it grows rooted in the ground. This eco-friendly plant is a unique species that grows wild in shallow lakes, marshy areas, ponds, canals, and along the shores of rivers and lakes in the Manipur valley. It thrives well in clay soil and in areas where cultivation of paddy is not suited. The plant grows up to 2.5 meters and has multiple dark green, round, soft, smooth stems that emerge from an underground stem with resilient, fibrous roots. It is mostly multiplied using slips and is usually cultivated during April and May when the first monsoon rains arrive. A water body of 1 ft depth is ideal for growing the plant. As the water gets deeper, the plant will grow thicker and taller which is not good for producing stock of good quality. After two years of

transplanting, harvest is done by cutting the reed near the base of the plant and can continue for up to 15 years. Uniform weeding is needed for the plant to grow healthily. The plant can be harvested every four months, which equals thrice a year providing ample profits. The best method for preserving the harvested rush is the smoking method where it is smoked by wood firing in a closed room. After which they are bundled either for sale or storage in a dry place.

The Process; The Craftmanship Behind *Kouna* Craft

The process of crafting *Kouna* begins with the selection of the dried *Kouna*. The skilled artisans then undergo a complex and labor-intensive process of cutting tillers in appropriate sizes, weaving and shaping the reeds into various designs and forms. Patterns are planned to meet the needed form. Various basic tools are used to handle the strands of grass according to the desired pattern when weaving which includes a hammer to flatten the reeds before weaving and for smoothness of the final product, nails to secure and maintain the reeds in shape, needle to close gaps and tuck the remaining reeds at the end and a cutting tool to trim and splice the reeds and also to remove the excess material for a clean finish. *Kouna* Craft covers a different range of exquisite products from baskets and trays to hats and home decor items and furniture, each presenting a distinct blend of functionality and aesthetics. Natural dyes are used to ensure that the craft remains sustainable and environmentally friendly. Embroidery can be incorporated to make the products more appealing and innovative. The close connection of these art forms with nature reflects the harmonious relationship between the Manipur people and their surroundings.



Courtesy: How Manipur's rural women are weaving wonders from Kauna weed (villagesquare.in)

Drying of *Kouna* Reed



Courtesy: Google Arts and Culture
Dried *Kouna* Reed



Courtesy: Google Arts and Culture

Weaving *Kouna* Reed



Courtesy: Google Arts and Culture
Kouna Craft products in Ima Market in Manipur

Sustainability and Preservation of *Kouna*

The extraction process of *Kouna* requires less energy, therefore it impacts less the environment. There is also no need for the usage of machines in the processing. Thus, compared to other mass-produced items, *Kouna* items maintain sustainability and use natural resources efficiently.

Skilled artisans are considered to be at the core of *Kouna* craft as they bring life to the reeds with their hands. These expert craftsmen and women play an essential role in maintaining this ancient tradition with their natural abilities and commitment. The continuity of the *Kouna* craft is ensured by sharing the skills needed for the craft from the forebearers of the *Kouna* craft or through training programs under certain NGOs and Government institutions.

With changes in time, the craftsmen also start finding new ways to innovate in *Kouna* craft. They begin to diversify, to learn from designers at training programs, to understand creativity and more good quality crafting to attract more customers. Fusion of the craft with embroidery and using natural colors such as vegetable dyes on the craft form and extending the limitations to making footwear with the *Kouna* reed are some of the innovations.

Conclusion

Kouna craft stands as a representation of the strength of the artistic tradition of Manipur and the deep bond between people and nature. The ancient craft not only beautifies homes and spaces but also symbolizes cultural identity and sustainability with its unique reed-based creations. The products made are environmentally friendly, biodegradable, and have the property of heat and sound insulation. The practices of this craft have also spurred its preservation and benefited the local communities by providing ample environment. The adaptation of the craft to the changes of time guarantees that the creativity and resourcefulness of the people of Manipur will endure and inspire future generations. *Kouna* Craft is entering the global market as it gains more recognition at the regional and national levels, thus displaying its rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship to the world.

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