



Naga Tribe Textile

The Naga tribes of Burma and North-east India have a long tradition of hand crafting exotic adornments, weapons and textiles resplendent with deeply symbolic motifs and tribal designs.

The Naga were strongly independent and fierce in battle during conflicts with the British in India during the 19th century. They were head hunters and the blankets that men wore, known as warrior blankets, would indicate the number of kills made in battle. A rich tradition of textile weaving is an integral aspect of Naga culture. Textiles, adorned with various tribal designs, indicate social status, wealth, and tribal belonging. The practice of head hunting has now ceased and so has the use of the head-hunter's motif.

Textiles are woven and embroidered exclusively by women and both hemp and cotton are used to make Naga blankets and shawls. They are woven on hand looms, using the back-strap method and embroidery is done using a porcupine needle. Natural dyes are made using plant extracts including indigo, jackfruit, and mahogany and provide an enchanting, natural quality. Unlike chemical dyes, fading occurs quite fast with exposure to the sun. The texture of the textile made in the state of Nagaland is different from the fabrics that are woven in the other states of India.

This particular piece shows how hand woven strips are sewn together to make a larger piece of cloth. The natural red dye used is less common than the dark blue, since there are several superstitions centred around its use. Sadly these subtle colours are fading away and being replaced by chemical dyes .

Spinning, like dyeing and weaving is performed by women and every Naga woman is supposed to weave the cloths of her family. Until recently, it was essential that every marriageable girl should know how to spin and weave, and tiny girls can often be seen with little toy looms experimenting with weaving.

Raw cotton is cleaned off its seeds by being rolled on a lat stone with a short stick used like a rolling pin and then carded by being flicked with a small sized bow. The clean cotton is gently rolled by hand with the help of a round stick over a flat stone or plank into sausages like slivers and is then hand spun onto a primitive spindle. The spun thread is then unwound and steeped in hot rice-water hardening as it dries ready for winding into a ball ready for weaving.

Weaving can begin as soon as the first fruit of the new rice crop have been eaten. The Naga loom (pictured below). The women keeps the necessary tension on the weave by sitting with the belt (Aphi) in the small of her back which is attached to a bar from which the warp (kotong) runs to the beam, itself firmly attached either to the wall of the house or to stakes fixed in the ground. It nearly takes 10 hours for an expert weaver to complete the plain strip or 30 hours to weave a complete cloth.

