

Back-strap Weaving

COUNTRYWIDE. *People in the interiors of the Philippines, like other ancient peoples during the late Neolithic Age, use a simple apparatus in weaving textiles – the back-strap loom. Even today, the back-strap is still in use notably in the island of Mindanao and the Cordilleras of northern Luzon to produce the very colorful and intricately designed textiles that identify the ethnicity of different people. Some of the people that use this are the Ifugao, Bontoc, Itneg, Ilianon, Yakan, Mandaya, Mansaka, Maranao, T'boli, Bagobo, Manobo and B'laan.*



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Back-strap weaving and the essential hand spinning of thread.



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Back-strap weaving in Northern Philippines.



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Back-strap weaving in Southern Philippines.

THERE ARE MANY variations in the configuration of this loom. Principally, it is comprised of the strands of the longitudinal threads called the warp, stretched between rods in the outermost end of the loom (warp-end rods) and the cloth end rods nearest the weaver. The warp-end rods are attached by cordage onto a firm support like a house beam. The warp threads are kept taut by means of cords from the cloth-end rods attached to a strap at the back of the weaver – hence the term, back-strap, or back-tension loom. From the top, a lease cord maintains the order of the threads, often providing an opening between the threads for the insertion of the shed roll. The shed roll, often made from a section of bamboo, divides the warp in half. Below this are the heddle sticks which spirally wrap threads that hold the warp threads. These provide the facility for introducing design patterns into the cloth. The horizontal threads (weft) are introduced by means of a bobbin pushed in between the warp threads and forced down by a wide and heavy beater to add another strand to the cloth being woven.

Design patterns are introduced into the cloth by the prior dyeing of the warp threads, which result in vertical designs relative to the loom. Otherwise, it could be the weft threads that are dyed to produce horizontal designs. A combination of these two methods makes a more intricate pattern. Additionally, dyed horizontal threads (supplementary weft) may be added to make the design more intricate.

While the back-strap loom is essentially the same throughout the country, there are differences in the number of heddle sticks that separate warp threads. The late historian William Henry Scott often wondered why a heddle stick was missing from back-strap looms in the north, while it is present in the south. The reason may just be a matter of textile design.