Weaving Around the World

A Reading A–Z Level U Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,022

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Weaving Around the World

Written by Kira Freed

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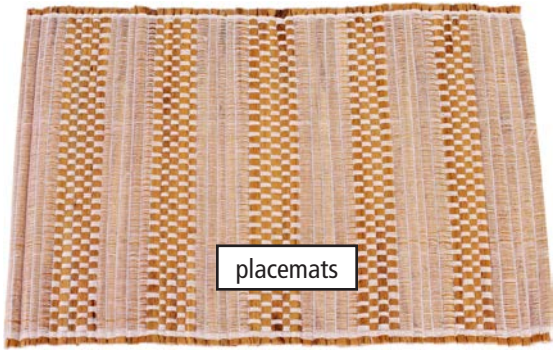
textiles *(n.)* cloth; woven fabric (p. 9)

tweed *(n.)* a woolen cloth with a rough surface and flecks of color (p. 14)

warp *(n.)* the vertical threads that are the foundation of a woven piece (p. 4)

weft *(n.)* the horizontal threads added to create a woven piece (p. 4)


jeans


placemats


bags

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Front cover: Geometric shapes and stripes are just some of the patterns made using weaving. This is a Bedouin weaving.

Back cover: Mayan teenagers attend Day of the Dead celebrations in traditional woven clothing.

Title page: A Peruvian woman weaves using a foot loom.

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Correlation

LEVEL U	
Fountas & Pinnell	Q
Reading Recovery	40
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Glossary

artisans *(n.)* people who are skilled at a craft or trade and create items by hand (p. 9)

backstrap loom *(n.)* a hand-weaving loom that is anchored to a tree or wall on one end and the weaver's body on the other (p. 12)

diversity *(n.)* variety (p. 16)

flat weaves *(n.)* woven items made with warp and weft threads, without knotting (p. 17)

intermingled *(v.)* mixed together (p. 16)

intricate *(adj.)* very detailed or complicated (p. 8)

mechanized *(v.)* introduced machines into the production process (p. 8)

motifs *(n.)* stories or decorative themes told by designs or patterns (p. 13)

raised weaves *(n.)* woven items made with a combination of threads and knots (p. 17)

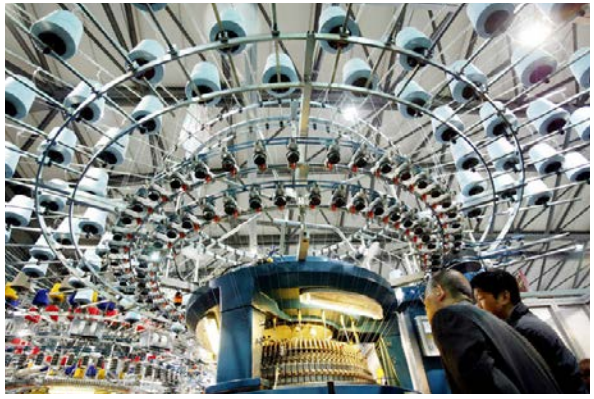
shed *(n.)* the space between warp threads where weft threads pass through (p. 7)

spinning *(n.)* the process of making thread or yarn from raw fibers (p. 6)

Conclusion

The cultures and weavers in this book represent just a few of the vast number of weaving traditions around the world. Each tradition reflects a people's native materials, everyday needs, and cultural symbols. When you see items woven by hand in a museum, art gallery, or ethnic shop, keep in mind that each piece tells a story about the long-standing traditions of the weaver's culture. Many of these cultures continue to thrive, even in the face of global modernization.

As you go about your everyday life, notice all the woven items you use. Imagine what you might wear if fabric for clothing didn't exist. Imagine if you didn't have sheets, blankets, or towels. Even the cloth produced by automated looms tells a story about the creative people who invented ways to convert plant fibers into fine fabrics.



This weaving machine can weave complex patterns quickly.

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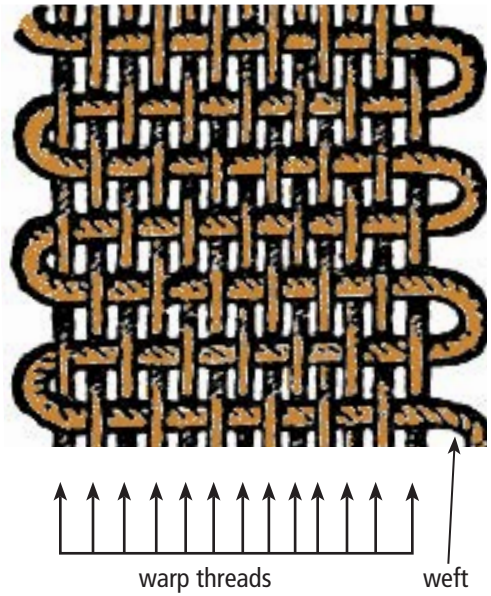
Introduction

The art and craft of weaving are responsible for an amazing variety of objects in our world. These include everyday items such as clothing fabric, sheets, blankets, and towels, as well as fine museum tapestries and other artistic expressions. Woven fibers are strong. Our earliest ancestors found that woven nets caught more fish at one time than did hooks or spears. Woven ropes made it easier to pull or carry large objects. Strips of leather could be woven and shaped into vests, belts, and bags.

Weaving is the process of creating fabric by lacing together two sets of threads. The **warp** is a set of threads that are held in position by tension, either on a device called a loom, or by gravity with the help of a weighted object—like a rock, a board, or even a tree branch. The **weft** is a set of threads that the weaver laces over and under the warp and then packs together tightly.



Explore More

Other weaving traditions you might want to learn more about include:

- Indonesian ikat
- Japanese Kasuri weaving
- Nepalese inlay weaving
- Peruvian tapestry weaving
- Ie-Toga—Samoan fine mat weaving
- Silk weaving in India, France, and China

You can also use Google or another search engine to search for *weaving traditions* or *traditional weaving*.

The Maori, along with other traditional Polynesian peoples, believe that the gods express their creativity through individual artisans. Raranga, therefore, has a spiritual dimension as well as an everyday function. In addition, this weaving tradition has been passed down from Maori ancestors and is a strong symbol of tribal traditions. The Maori suffered oppression and lost much of their land during a harsh colonial era. Raranga is living proof that their culture has survived. This weaving tradition symbolizes the unity of the Maori people and the wholeness of all creation.

Oceania—Raranga (Maori Flax Weaving)

Raranga is a traditional Polynesian weaving technique of the Maori (MOU-ree), the native people of New Zealand. Although the technique is called flax weaving, the plant, called *harakeke* (hah-ruh-KEY-key), is actually a kind of lily and not true flax. Harakeke is an exceptionally strong material that the Maori have used for at least one thousand years to create mats, baskets, bags, clothing, and other items. Maori weaving has always been mostly a women's art. However, men have developed ways to use harakeke for building and for hunting and fishing, such as to make ropes and fishing lines.

Maori eel-fishing trap

This Maori cloak made from harakeke in the early 1800s feels silky and soft.

How We Began Weaving

Woven items have existed since the dawn of human history. Every area of the world has developed its own style of weaving—its own materials, patterns, and colors. Weavers have always used whatever materials were available to them locally: yarn, string, wool, silk, cotton, plants, and grass.

This vertical loom is modeled after an ancient Viking loom.

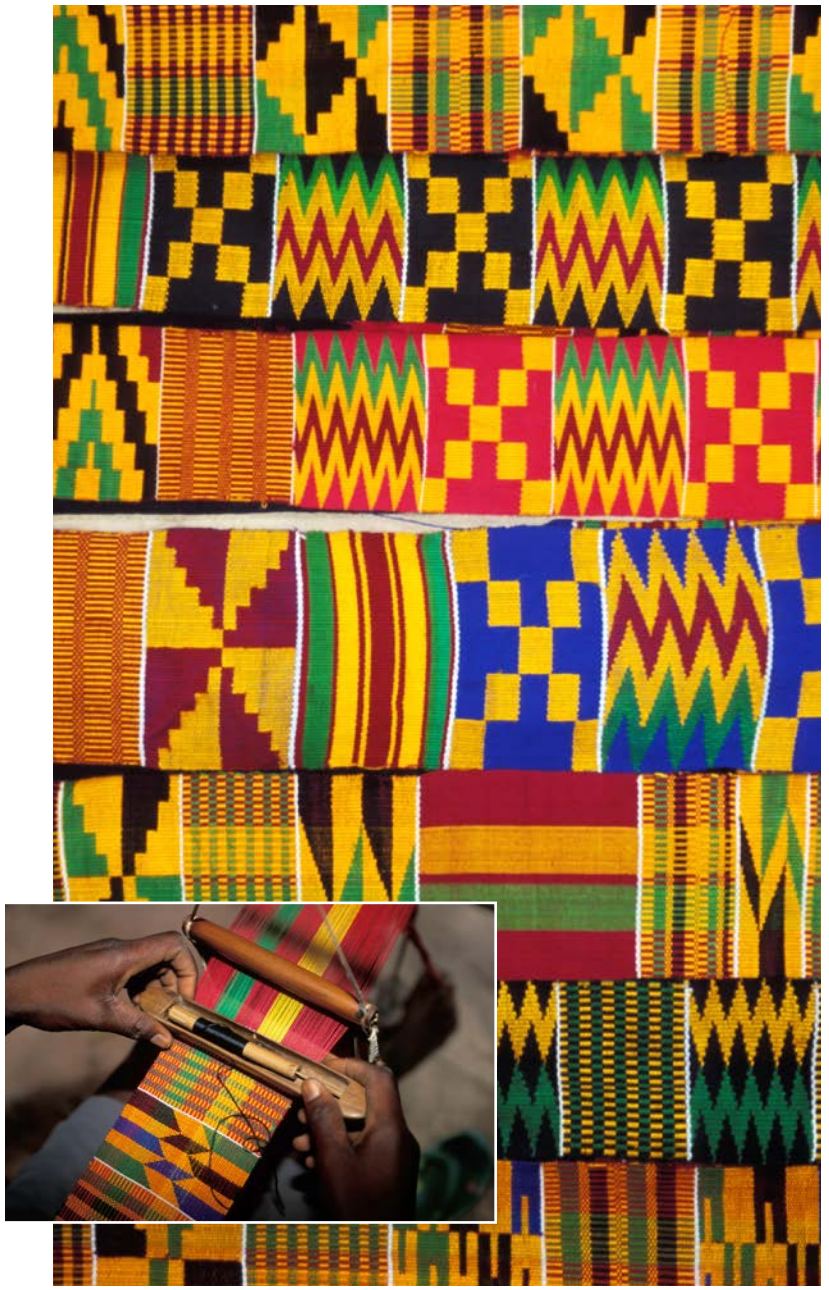
Our earliest ancestors gathered natural resources for food, shelter, and clothing. But one day, someone was inspired to try something new. Perhaps he noticed how the elaborately woven nests of the weaver bird protected its eggs. He may have taken a nest apart to see how it was constructed. Or he saw how the wind had matted together blades of grass after a storm. Or perhaps the first attempts at weaving happened after someone saw how snugly the fingers of her hands braided together.

Once people began to experiment, the uses for weaving multiplied. The first woven objects were intended to make life easier. By bending grasses and reeds, and adding leaves, people made simple mats. Mats could be used for floors, roofs, or walls, or to carry things. Over time, people developed skills and weaving traditions that were passed down from generation to generation.

Weaving techniques experienced an important leap forward 20,000 to 30,000 years ago when people discovered that they could make fine string by twisting together thin bundles of plant material. This development was the foundation of sewing and **spinning**, as well as more advanced weaving techniques.

Between 8,000 and 3,000 BC, the first simple looms were invented. The frame of the loom held warp threads firmly in place while the weft threads

An 1879 engraving of a weaver in India



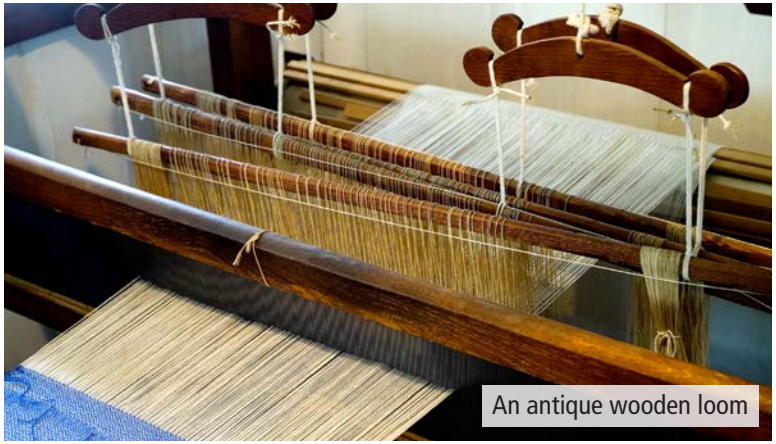
Different types of Kente cloth on display. A weaver works on a length of Kente cloth (inset).

Africa—Kente Cloth (Asante and Ewe Weavers of Ghana)

Kente cloth is a ceremonial cloth made in the countries of Ghana and Togo by the Asante and Ewe peoples, particularly the men. Kente cloth is meant to be worn for special social and religious events. Vibrant and bold in color and design, the cloth is woven in long strips three to eight inches wide. The strips are cut into shorter lengths and sewn together to make larger pieces of cloth.

This boy wears a 50-year-old Kente cloth robe.

Kente cloth is more than just fabric for clothing—it represents the culture, spiritual beliefs, and traditions of the Asante and Ewe peoples. Warp threads and weft designs each have a name and meaning that reflect beliefs, historical events, social organization, or other aspects of the culture. Long ago, Kente cloth was only for royalty, but over time it has become available to everyone. It is an important symbol of cultural pride.



An antique wooden loom

were alternated over and under them. One early loom used poles placed in the ground onto which the warp was tied. Another style of loom used clay or stone weights to create warp tension.

People continued to use these simple weaving techniques for thousands of years to make cloth for household use. But weaving underwent an important change with the invention of a more complicated loom.

New weaving technology was invented in China during the Shang Period (1766 to 1122 BC). Someone had the idea to feed the warp threads through individual needlelike devices attached to crossbars. A lever operated by foot or hand controlled these bars. Lifting some warp threads but not others created a **shed**, an opening between groups of warp threads.

For the first time, a weaver could pass a spool of thread between groups of warp threads instead of having to lift them one at a time. This development **mechanized** weaving enough that weavers could produce much larger quantities of cloth than with earlier looms. This Chinese loom design is the basis of all modern looms.

Later developments in loom design allowed for the creation of **intricate** patterns, as well as even more efficiency and higher productivity. During the Industrial Revolution (late 1700s to early 1800s), the weaving of cloth became a mechanized industry. As new loom technology greatly increased the amount of cloth that could be produced, the spinning industry expanded to keep up with the greater demand for yarns.

This loom from about 1890 is still used to make fabric at the American Textile History Museum.

Carpets for sale in Morocco

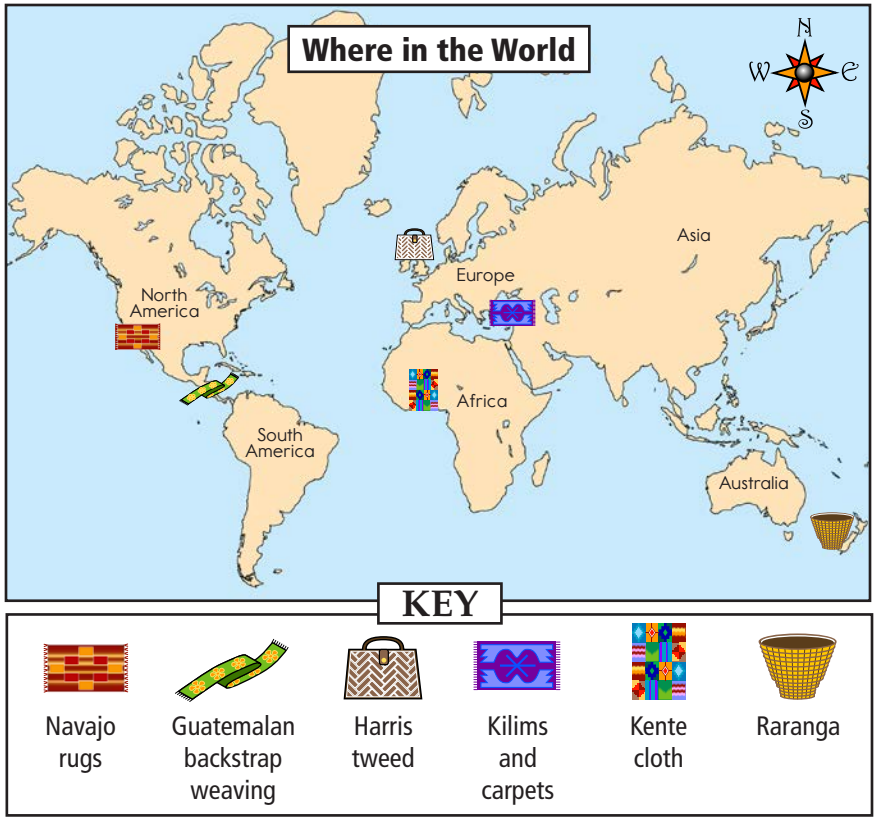
Kilims and carpets use two different weaving techniques. Kilims are **flat weaves**, meaning they use a basic combination of warp and weft threads to create intricate geometrical patterns. Kilims have been made for centuries by villagers and tribal members for everyday needs such as decoration, wrapping, room dividers, and floor coverings.

Carpets are **raised weaves**, which use a combination of weaving and knotting to create densely packed rugs that are thick and heavy. Many carpets have floral or other nature patterns. Traditionally, carpets have been used for floors, beds, and prayer. The motifs of both kilims and carpets relate to cultural origins and traditions, making the rugs symbols of heritage as well as useful and decorative items.

Asia—Turkish and Persian Kilims and Carpets

Turkish and Persian rugs are known throughout the world for their amazing beauty and intricacy. The tradition began at least as far back as 7,000 BC and has evolved into a variety of weaving styles and patterns, each associated with a specific region. This part of the world was once the center of the Ottoman Empire, one of the largest empires ever known. The area includes a rich **diversity** of people, races, languages, religions, and cultures that have **intermingled** for many centuries. This diversity is reflected in the variety of weaving traditions, which have generally been a women's activity.

Women make carpets in Turkey.



Weaving Around the World

Today, most **textiles** are made by automated machines. However, many **artisans** around the world still weave on handlooms or in small weaving businesses. These people keep alive the tools, skills, and craft traditions of weavers from long ago. Let's look at some of the cultures that create works of great beauty using traditional weaving techniques.

North America—Navajo Rugs

The Navajo settled in present-day northern Arizona and New Mexico more than 600 years ago. In this arid region of mountains and open spaces, they developed a nomadic lifestyle that focused on raising sheep for food, wool, and clothing. Following a period of conflict with the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the Navajo moved to a reservation that covers parts of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico.

Navajo weaving began through contact in the 1600s with Pueblo tribes who lived just east of the Navajo. Weaving was a men's task in Pueblo culture, but among the Navajo it became a women's specialty. For two centuries, weavers created practical clothing items such as ponchos and belts. They used patterns from their own basketry traditions as well as designs borrowed from other tribes.

Navajo textiles for sale

Do You Know?

The Navajo Nation is the largest Native American tribe in the United States, with more than 250,000 members.

A traditional Harris tweed loom in the 1980s; a handbag made with Harris tweed

Around the same time, Harris tweed began to be inspected, and a certification process created confidence in its quality, which boosted sales. Advances over the years have allowed weavers to produce their product more efficiently. Still, the centuries-old island tradition of weaving Harris tweed by hand has withstood the Scottish mainland trend to mechanize.

Europe (Scotland)—Harris Tweed

Imagine a string of remote northern islands with rugged coastlines, treeless hills, and uncountable numbers of sheep. Harris **tweed**, one of the highest-quality woolen textiles in the world, is made from wool that is dyed, spun, and woven on a group of islands off the northwest coast of Scotland called the Outer Hebrides (HEH-bruh-deez). The islanders preserve their Gaelic culture and language, and many have not ventured off the islands for decades.

Long ago, weavers used an early type of loom that was operated by hand. Technological advancements around 1900 had an important impact on Harris tweed weaving, which up to that point had been done mostly by women. Because the new, heavier kind of loom required greater strength to operate it, the making of Harris tweed became mostly a men's activity. As technology continued to develop, weavers began producing larger quantities of textiles.

A man weaves Harris tweed

A Navajo woman weaves a rug. What else in this photograph appears to be woven?

As contact with white traders and settlers increased in the late 1800s, new techniques, yarns, and dyes influenced Navajo weavers. Increased contact also meant more trade and a greater demand for items and patterns that were popular with buyers. In response, weavers began to make wall hangings and decorative rugs rather than clothing. Although weaving styles have changed through the years, Navajo weaving continues to be some of the finest cultural artwork in the world. It is also an important source of income for the tribe.

Latin America—
Guatemalan Backstrap Weaving

The Mayan civilization, which reached its peak around AD 300 to 900, was centered in the Central American country of Guatemala. The modern descendants of the Mayas make up close to half of the country's population. Many of these people live in mountain villages that are fairly isolated from the modern world.

Guatemalan weavers have created vibrantly colored textiles on the **backstrap loom** since before the time of European contact in the 1520s. This kind of loom is anchored to a tree or wall at one end and to the weaver's body at the other end. The weaver leans forward to loosen warp tension and lift warp threads, and leans back to tighten the warp and pack down the weft.

A Guatemalan woman weaves using a backstrap loom.

Many of the more complex patterns take many years to master.

In addition to vibrant colors, this form of Guatemalan weaving is known for its animal and nature **motifs** as well as unique geometric patterns. Backstrap weaving is a women's tradition taught by mothers and grandmothers to girls when they reach the age of seven or eight. Weaving allows girls and women to display their artistry as well as their dedication to cultural traditions. Woven cloths are made into blouses, shawls, belts, bags, all-purpose cloths for carrying babies or goods, and other items.