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## WEAVING FOR YOUR LIFE: CREATING TEXTILES IN DOLPA, NEPAL

Anne M. Johnson

High in the Himalayan mountains, two weeks walk from the nearest road, weaving is a necessity, not an option, for the women of the Dolpa region of Nepal. A woman weaves all of her life, and must weave for her family to survive the difficult life at this high altitude. Picture three weavers working outside in the late winter snowfall, seated on the ground within a low-walled enclosure. There can be more light and warmth outside, rather than inside, their stone houses. Weaving also provides a place of community, where men, women, and children gather to card fibers, spin, weave, talk, and play. The women in our picture have their teapots warming over embers beside them. The weaver on the left of the group is doing her share to help finish a blanket for the husband of a woman in their community who died. Weaving is that essential to their lives.<sup>1</sup>

I am going to take a moment to describe the setting, as it provides the context for the weaving the women of Dolpa do. Nepal is a small country, roughly the size of Illinois, landlocked between India and Tibet. It is only about 125 miles across, but it ranges from just above sea level in the south to the highest mountain range in the world in the north, the Himalayas. Nepal's mountains and valleys contain a great diversity of cultures and languages, grounded in its two main religions, Hinduism and Buddhism.

The valleys of Dolpa that I stayed in lie just 175 miles, as the crow flies, from the capital city of Kathmandu. Yet, just as Kathmandu feels like a world away from the United States, Dolpa similarly feels like a different world from Kathmandu. As an alternative to the two-week walk from the end of the road into the mountains, it is also possible to take two flights on small planes, depending on the weather, and eventually arrive at an airstrip carved out of the mountainside. From there, it is only three to five days walk to the villages in the Tarap and Suligad river valleys, in southern to mid Dolpa, that I visited. There are additional villages to the north, closer to the Tibetan border, but it is more cumbersome for foreigners to get permission to visit there.<sup>2</sup>

Geographically, Dolpa is very isolated. As one scholar has described it: "Dolpo lies at the same latitude as Cairo, but there the similarity ends. It may well appear as inhospitable a land as any human beings could choose to settle in. It lies across no route from anywhere to anywhere else." (Snellgrove 1992: 5). The residents do travel and conduct trade (in which woven goods play a part), often by yak caravan, with Tibet to the north and the villages of Nepal to the south.<sup>3</sup>

Culturally, Dolpa is Tibetan, and Buddhism permeates life there (Jest 1975: 291-92). (Fig. 1). By being on the Nepal side of the border, Dolpa was saved from much of the impact of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, though access to many of its customary trade routes and pasture lands was disrupted, and the arrival of Tibetan refugees increased

the pressure on its scant resources (Fürer-Haimendorf 1988: 176, 178 181-87). Dolpa is also home to some of the few practitioners of the Bon Po religion, the indigenous religion that pre-dated Buddhism's arrival in Tibet in the eighth century, but now appears to be quite intertwined with the local Buddhism (Snellgrove 1989: 41-54; Tucci 1956: 25-35). Dolpa was closed to foreigners for many years until 1989. An anthropologist of the area, one of the few foreigners to live there in the early 1960s, described life there as similar to living in Tibet centuries ago.<sup>4</sup>

In this remote setting, there is no electricity, or running water other than the river, or source of heat other than a fire, to make life easier. And it can be really cold there. The small villages that I stayed in lie at altitudes between 12,000 and 14,000 feet. There is only one growing season, in which they can grow only a few crops, mainly barley and potatoes (Fürer-Haimendorf 1988: 169; Jest 1975: 103-04, 108-11). They can be buried in snow in the winter; yet, during the day, in the sun, it can be quite comfortable, given their latitude. A woman must stay in almost constant motion here to take care of her family's needs--her duties include child care, agriculture, caring for animals, collecting fuel and water, preparing food, and weaving. Her weaving tasks must be woven in around her other daily and seasonal obligations. Winter is an important time for weaving, as some of her other obligations are less pressing.<sup>5</sup>

A woman's life of weaving starts at the age of about nine or ten, when she learns to weave, first on a rough grouping of sticks and string that imitates the loom, moving up to simple plain weave projects like boot straps, and then to more difficult items, like the heavy chuba cloth and cumlo blankets woven on four harnesses that I will describe below. As a young girl learns, any woman of the community might lean over her shoulder to advise or correct her. In the busiest years of child rearing and managing the household, a woman may hire an older women, whose own household responsibilities are now less, to weave for her family's needs. The weavers for hire are paid in grain and assistance in their fields at another season. The women of Dolpa are also hired as weavers by the residents of the lower-altitude villages where they sometimes spend the cold winter months. (Fisher 1987: 107-08; Fürer-Haimendorf 1988: 205-06).

Activities necessary for the production of textiles are always visible around the village, as they often take place outside the fortress-like and smokey houses. The methods used reflect the needs of the makers in this challenging environment. The tools are very portable--drop spindles and backstrap looms--so work can be picked up and put down, stopped and started, to fit in around other obligations. The women can work almost anywhere, inside or out, up in summer pastures with the yaks, down in lower villages in winter, or on the road, so to speak, when traveling with a yak caravan. In this environment, also, a woman needs to accomplish a lot without a great investment of time in any one activity. Her methods reflect a kind of minimalist approach, but with quite lovely results.

The fibers used most often are sheep's wool, often obtained by trade from Tibet, and the rough and soft fibers of the yak and goat. Cotton is sometimes used for warp

thread, but must be obtained from Kathmandu or Dunai, the district center in southern Dolpa. The softer fibers are used for items that will be close to the skin, and higher quality blankets; the rougher fibers are used for the sacks that yaks carry their loads in, tent fabric, and rougher blankets. The fibers may be beaten to clean them, then carded, and spun on a wooden drop spindle. Some yarn is boiled after spinning and plying, for additional cleaning. A woman might spin while walking back from the fields, or sitting by the fire at night, or among the folks gathered outside during the day. Depending on its planned use, the yarn may be spun tightly or loosely, plied or used as a single strand. The yarn I looked at closely was spun Z and plied S, but I do not know that this is a general rule.

Most weaving is done on a backstrap, or pongta, loom, and the warp is prepared with that in mind.<sup>6</sup> The warp is wound on wooden pegs, or lumbar, pounded into the ground. Again, the tools are efficient for the setting. A woman can reach all of the pegs from her seated position this way, rather than a method that involves walking or passing yarn back and forth (compare Hecht 1989: 12, 61, 81), and winding goes quite quickly. The number of pegs used increases with the length of the warp. Length is measured by the *tu*, the distance from the elbow of a bended arm to the fingertips. Women usually seem to add a little more to that, some going back again as far as their first knuckle, so the measurement may have been based on a man's arm.

A warp may be wound on as few as two pegs, and popped right out to weave, in a plain weave, a *namlo*, the band worn on the forehead to carry a *dhoko*, the large basket often used to transport items on the mountainous trails. With more pegs, such as seven, nine, or eleven, the warp for a longer plain weave item, or for a twill, can be prepared. A typical plain weave warp may be wound on seven lumbar, with four pegs on the weaver's left and three on her right. The pegs are located, and the warp is wound, so that they quickly and efficiently convert to the pieces of the loom itself, and with distinct sheds. A shed stick, or *wolu*, is inserted at the cross, between the second and third pegs on the weaver's left, for a plain weave. The first and last pegs on the weaver's left essentially become parts of the loom--the first peg becomes the *shok*, or closing rod, and the last peg the *til*, or lease stick. With this system, a weaver can roll up her loom and go home for the day, when the sun falls behind the mountains, and easily re-establish thread order and tension when she resumes her work.

Heddles (*ne*) are created by running a string--often cotton, which reduces friction with the wool warp--between two sheds, dipping a finger down to bring up a loop around the appropriate thread, accumulating several loops on the hand, and then transferring them to a heddle stick (*nenyu*). The heddle string is carefully rewound and saved, after each use.

The warp, a full circle often 20 to 30 feet in length, is stretched out on two wooden pieces, the breast beam at the weaver's belly (*chikpa*) in two parts, to hold the warp tight, the warp beam at the far end (*tenshing*) anchored by heavy rocks. The two pieces of the *chikpa* are held tight by the ends of the strap that runs behind the weaver's

back (gera). A foot board (pongrip), also supported by rocks, gives the weaver a surface to press against to control tension. A temple (cher) attached just in front of the breast beam helps to maintain warp width, and the large beater-in (tak) helps to produce very dense cloth.<sup>7</sup>

For a twill, the warp winding process looks even more complicated, as the diagram of a twill warp being wound on 9 lumbars (gu pun, or nine brothers) shows (Fig. 2). The weaver would be sitting at the top of the diagram. Two threads are wound at a time. They split and cross around the pegs marked 3 and 1, and reverse direction and do the same again. My impression was that this winding process created the sheds necessary for the twill, so that threading the harnesses was greatly simplified. The alternative seems so time-consuming, if you picture trying to thread a twill warp, made up of hundreds of ends, by simply counting and looping the heddle thread around the appropriate ends. A weaving friend of mine recently recreated this warp and found the potential for multiple sheds, but we have not fully established that those sheds would organize the warp threads just as needed for the twill. The process seems quite efficient, though, to me. I would be very interested in hearing from others who may have observed similar methods of warp winding.<sup>8</sup>

On the backstrap loom, larger pieces must be woven in panels that are later sewn together. Physically, weaving can be very demanding work, because of the sizeable length and width of the warp, the heaviness of the fiber used, and the extent to which the weft must be pounded in, to create the dense, warm, cloth they need. I will describe just a few of the more commonly woven items. Great effort and care goes into preparing them, and they are extremely important to those who use them. Their work may seem somewhat repetitive, as each woman does much the same thing, possibly reflecting the efficiency of doing the same thing over and over, given their limited time, or possibly reflecting an aspect of Buddhist society and art, where individual expression is less emphasized than in our society.

Looking at clothing first: the basic element of all clothing, for men, women, and children, is a robe called a chuba, which is made from nambu cloth. This looks quite tedious to make to me, as it is white on white, warp and weft, with no color or design, and they have to make a lot of it (Fig. 3). To make enough cloth just for chubas for her husband and one child, a woman would have to weave about 24 tus, or 11 yards, of this cloth, which would take about 15 days. The warp is usually a double ply of tightly spun wool, and the weft two loosely spun strands of wool. It is woven in a 2/2 twill, with roughly 34 ends per inch, and 22 picks per inch. The cloth is extensively washed and kneaded afterwards, usually by women working together, so that it is somewhat felted and softer to wear, and will not fray when cut. After washing, I have seen it rolled on one of the warp-winding pegs, to squeeze out excess moisture and to press out the wrinkles from washing. Sometimes the cloth is dyed red, but often it is left its natural color. The cloth is then tailored by men into the chuba in a manner that avoids any waste (Jest 1975: 197).

In contrast to the vast expanses of white chuba cloth, the weaver can be more playful and experiment a bit when making belts and the bootstraps used to hold up their woven boots. Belts and bootstraps are warp-faced plain weave decorated with pick-up designs using the existing warp threads, or more intricate pick-up designs made from a set of extra warp patterning threads, and they are fringed at both ends. The designs made with the extra warp patterning threads generally represent religious symbols. They include the dorje, or thunderbolt, which is both a symbol of power and compassion and a ritual object used by the lama in prayer; the yundum, an ancient symbol of enlightenment or good fortune; the tilbu, or bell, also a ritual object used by the lama; and the chari, a decorative design used in monasteries.<sup>9</sup> People from the same village or valley are often recognizable because they wear the same color stripes and same designs on their belts and bootstraps. Women can expand their repertoire of designs by studying the designs on a belt or bootstrap from another village or valley.

The blankets produced in Dolpa are beautiful and warm and put to many uses, including as items of clothing and trade. It is possible that the women made more elaborate blankets in the past. Peter Aufschnaiter walked extensively through northern Dolpa around 1960, on behalf of a commission set up to assist Tibetan refugees who came to Nepal after the Chinese occupation.<sup>10</sup> Ten years later he visited Dolpa again, and wrote: "In Dolpo blankets are produced in considerable quantity, in some of the villages the design is one of the best in Nepal reminding of highly developed work of Bhutan. I saw such blankets about 10 years ago but not this year." (Aufschnaiter 1970: 3). In my mind, Bhutanese weaving is quite highly decorated (e.g., Myers and Bean 1994), which is not what I saw in Dolpa.<sup>11</sup> Yet, photographs of Dolpa from the 1950s and 1960s show blankets that look exactly the same as the ones I will describe below (e.g., Snellgrove 1989: plates XXIIb, XVIIIa, b; Snellgrove 1992: plates 5, 19a, 29; Jest 1975: 31, 209, 290, 337, 338, 390). The mystery may be solved by a visit to Phijor, a village I did not reach in my travels in Dolpa, but is described as having the best weavers.<sup>12</sup> Or the answer may be that Aufschnaiter thought the blankets of Dolpa very beautiful, as I do, and made the most complimentary comparison he could think of.

The cumlo is a heavy, 2/2 twill blanket, densely packed and extensively washed afterwards to be softer, just like the chuba cloth, leaving only the colorful weft yarn visible. It is used as bedding, and by women as a beautiful cape, held with a broad silver clasp resembling the shape of the dorje or thunderbolt (Fig. 4). It is woven with a cotton or wool warp, and a wool weft. The broad, brightly colored stripes do not line up when the panels are sewn together, giving it a very lively appearance. The colors, at this time, are made mostly from boxed dyes from India. Some natural dyes are still in use, but I did not see them being processed. As in other places, the color blue holds particular significance, and requires great time and care in its preparation, which is done outside of the home, to avoid offending certain gods.

Several different warp-faced, plain weave, multi-colored striped blankets are made. Some also have pick-up designs and fringe on one end. These blankets are not washed

and fulled the way chuba cloth and cumlo are. They are used for bedding, drying grains, and other uses. I am told that some are worn as a covering in the rain.<sup>13</sup>

The last blanket I will describe is also a warp-faced, plain weave, striped blanket, always woven with blue, white, and red stripes; however, it would never be found on the ground with grain drying on it. It is the most finely woven of the blankets and used only on special occasions. This blanket is fringed on one end, using complete loops of warp thread, so the fringe does not end in a rough edge. I did not see one of these blankets being made, but saw them in several homes and in some monasteries. A photograph taken by Professor Snellgrove in the late 1950s shows these blankets in use, as well as cumlos, worn by women while dancing on a special occasion outside Yangsher Monastery in Upper Dolpo (Snellgrove 1992: plate 19a). This blanket may not be made in every village, and seems to be very valuable as an item of trade; in 1992, one of these blankets could be traded for five sheep in Tibet.<sup>14</sup>

Rougher items are made from yak fiber. Even pazzi, the durable sacks used to transport goods by yak, are quite beautiful. They are warp-faced plain weave, with a warp that is thickly spun and plied yak fiber, in varying stripes of its natural shades of brown and white. The weft is a thinner, two-ply yarn. Tent cloth, for summer encampments at the yak pastures, is also woven from rougher fibers.

A few women can afford a simple four-harness frame loom (teetak), but its use is subject to religious restrictions in at least one of the valleys I visited, the Tarap valley. Sitting on a raised seat, such as this loom has, is a privilege usually permitted only to the lama. To avoid offending the gods, which might put the crops at risk, women do not weave on the teetak loom during the growing season. Alternatively, I have heard the prohibition described as a prohibition on weaving just at the time of planting; weaving can resume as the crops grow (Jest 1993: personal communication; compare Jest 1975: 194). As another efficiency, the women I met who owned four harness looms avoided re-threading them. They always left some warp thread on the loom when they finished a project--new warp threads were simply tied onto old, and the weaving continued.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the weaving methods of the women of Dolpa are shaped by the challenging setting in which they live and work. The markets for their weaving are currently shifting. Woven goods are still primarily made for family use and some trade. Blankets were formerly traded in Tibet to the north, and the villages of Nepal to the south. I was told, though, by a resident of Dunai, the district center in southern Dolpa, that since the trekkers started arriving in 1989, very few blankets have been available in Dunai. The trekkers will pay about twice what the Dunai residents would pay. Foreign visitors (presumably mostly trekkers) also pay substantially more when they buy a blanket from a village resident in Dolpa, than when they buy the same type of blanket that has made its way down to a shop near the Buddhist stupa, Boudanath, in Kathmandu.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the influx of tourists, other changes are coming to Dolpa as well. The government schools, which have never been very successful there, in part because of the cultural differences between Dolpa and Nepal proper, are being supplemented by locally-supported

schools, which appear to be doing well. Girls, in particular, had little opportunity for education in the past. Those that can attend school now will have less time for weaving, and perhaps less interest in such labor intensive work. Much of the Dolpa area has been designated a national park, the Shey-Phoksumdo National Park. While the villagers still live and work on their land, they are affected by park restrictions and are brought into contact with the many park personnel and visitors, who come from other parts of Nepal and around the world. Even Nepali park personnel may experience Dolpa as quite a foreign place, and some purchase textiles as useful souvenirs. I am told that the women in one area now weave bags that are popular with the park personnel. Dolpa is also beginning to receive money from some international aid organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, including a substantial Dutch investment in improving the trail up the Tarap Valley, which makes it easier for the residents to travel to the villages to their south. The changes that are taking place and which lie ahead will certainly take Dolpa out of its place in centuries past. Some of the change is very welcome, to ease the hardship of their lives, and to provide skills to assist them in shaping their future. I worry somewhat that the women's traditional weaving skills and designs may be lost or re-shaped by all these changes, but I certainly hope that the effect of the changes on the lives of the women overall is a very beneficial one.

## NOTES

1. I made three visits to the Dolpa region of Nepal between 1990 and 1993, shortly after it re-opened to foreigners in 1989. My research was supported in part by the Fulbright Program, for which I am very grateful. My thanks also go to the patient weavers in Dolpa who answered my many questions, several friends and colleagues in Nepal who assisted me in my work, and family and friends at home who provide ongoing help and encouragement.
2. Thus, while I speak in terms of Dolpa in this paper, my personal observations are limited to the Tarap and Suligad river valleys and the people from Upper Dolpa who passed through them.
3. The main components of the trade are salt from Tibet and rice and grain from the Nepali villages south of Dolpa. Wool from Tibet is another common trade item. The residents of Dolpa act as middlemen of sorts, transporting trade goods in both directions, and thereby acquiring items essential to supplement their meager crops (Fürer-Haimendorf 1988: 184-93, 210; Jest 1975: 155-69; Valli and Summers 1994: 120-21, 186). The women of Dolpa provide blankets, which serve as additional items of trade, and the heavy-duty woven sacks, described further below, that are essential for transporting the salt and grain by yak.
4. Jest, Corneille. Personal communication, 1993.
5. Men's work is quite distinct from women's, and will not be described in detail here, but also includes wonderful work with fibers. Just briefly, men are responsible for certain of the spinning, all sewing, and creating what I think of as yak tack--the straps, bands, and ropes used to transport items by yak, an essential companion in their high altitude life.
6. I have included, in very rough, phonetic spelling, some Tibetan and Nepali terms. My hope is that these rough forms will provide enough information for Tibetan speakers to make connections with what they have seen or may see. Most of my vocabulary is similar to that given in Denwood 1974: 96-97. The precise Tibetan terminology and its geographic scope certainly merits further study.
7. This form of loom is described in Denwood 1974: 34-35, Roth 1974: 72-74, and Jest 1975: 193. Compare Broudy 1979: 76-101, which describes a range of backstrap looms, but not this form in particular.



8. Denwood 1974: 58-59, Roth 1974: 72-73, and Jest 1975: 193 mention the twill. Dunsmore 1993: 142-43 describes a method of winding a warp for a twill used by the Gurung people in Nepal, which appears to differ from what I observed in Dolpa but accomplish a similar efficient result.
9. Sherpa, Phurba Gyelzen. Personal communication, 1998. See also Pal 1991; Rhie and Thurman 1996.
10. Jest 1993: personal communication. Peter Aufschnaiter spent decades living and working in Himalayan areas. His description, therefore, is quite interesting to me. He is the mountaineer who reached Lhasa in 1945 with Heinrich Harrer, the author of the book *Seven Years in Tibet*.
11. The weaving from central Bhutan appears to be the most similar to the weaving of Dolpa (see Myers and Bean 1994: 55-59, 180-84), but the phrase the "highly developed work of Bhutan" would seem to describe the more decorated Bhutanese work.
12. "The women of Phijer have the reputation of being the best weavers in Dolpo" (Valli and Summers 1994: 95). Dr. Jest also describes the Phijor leeyu, a type of blanket or mat, as particularly beautiful (Jest 1993: personal communication). The photographs of Valli and Summers do cover northern Dolpa, but do not show any blankets particularly different from what I observed (e.g., Valli and Summers 1987; Valli and Summers 1994).
13. My understanding is that these blankets would be described as leeyu, but my notes of conversations with various people contain contradictory definitions in this regard.
14. I believe this blanket would be described as a lepta, but again my notes contain contradictory information.
15. As a final description of their efficiency, the women of Dolpa were strikingly good at tying tiny knots, with their strong hands, to repair broken threads (warp, weft, or heddle), and at creating methods to even out a tilting warp (weaving extra short rows, creating tiny tils from small sticks, etc.). Their methods make the most of one of their valuable resources, wool.
16. Some Dolpa residents make their way down to Kathmandu in the winter, and visit the important Buddhist sites there. The sale of handwoven items helps to fund the trip.

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Fig. 1. A Buddhist chorten in the Tarap valley.

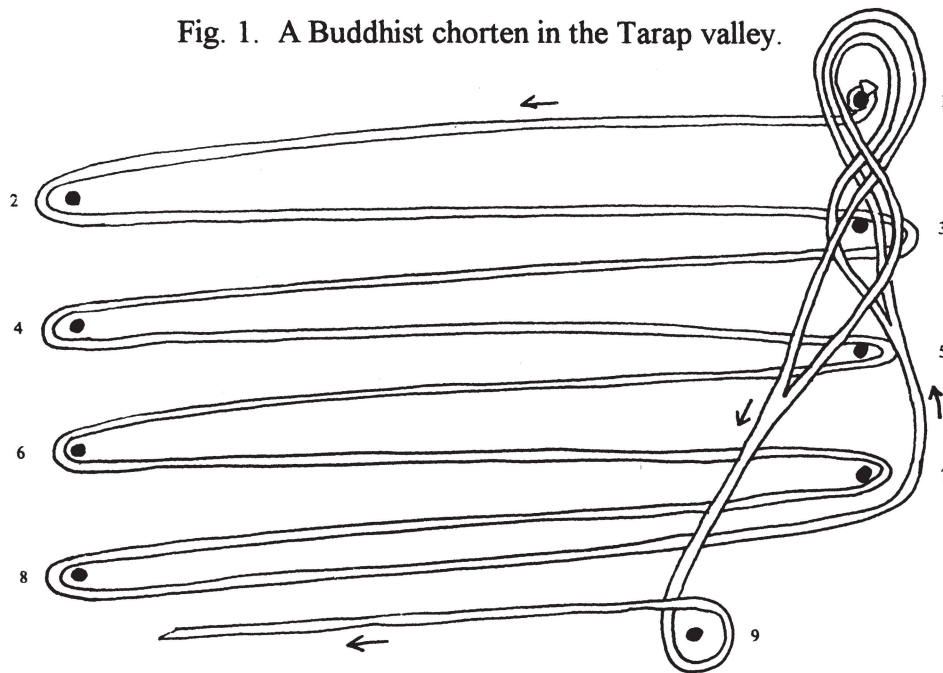


Fig. 2. Winding a twill warp on nine lumbars.



Fig. 3. Weaving cloth for a chuba, Kagar, Tarap valley.



Fig. 4. Wearing cumlo, Kagar, Tarap valley.