

Beginning the journey into ‘Textiles of Bhutan’

I would like to take you on our journey through our photo journal and documentation of discovery, events, connections and processes. ‘Textiles of Bhutan’ was the overarching focus of the first Artist in Residence. Given the long and rich history of textiles in Bhutan it is a huge topic. As the artists in residence are usually outsiders to Bhutan their knowledge of the traditional arts and crafts is limited and they need considerable research in order to make informed responses.

The weaving process is multi layered and rich with tradition. The art of weaving is a multi step process that includes cleaning, carding and spinning of the threads. These threads are then dyed and wound into balls. The setting up of the loom and weaving patterns are very specialized processes.

Much of the finer details are hidden from view. The art of weaving is passed down from mother to daughter with very little being recorded. This makes the preservation and continuation of weaving vulnerable.

Different types of weaving are to be found in different parts of the country.

Different threads, looms, techniques and processes are used according to where and how you live.

Weaving in the east of Bhutan is different from weaving in the rest of Bhutan.

Our journey was never straight or sequential. It was a random uncovering of resources and processes.



Textile museum Thimpu

The artist in residence program began with a visit to the textile museum in Thimphu. Along with a carefully curated collection on display there were also women demonstrating their skills on backstrap looms.





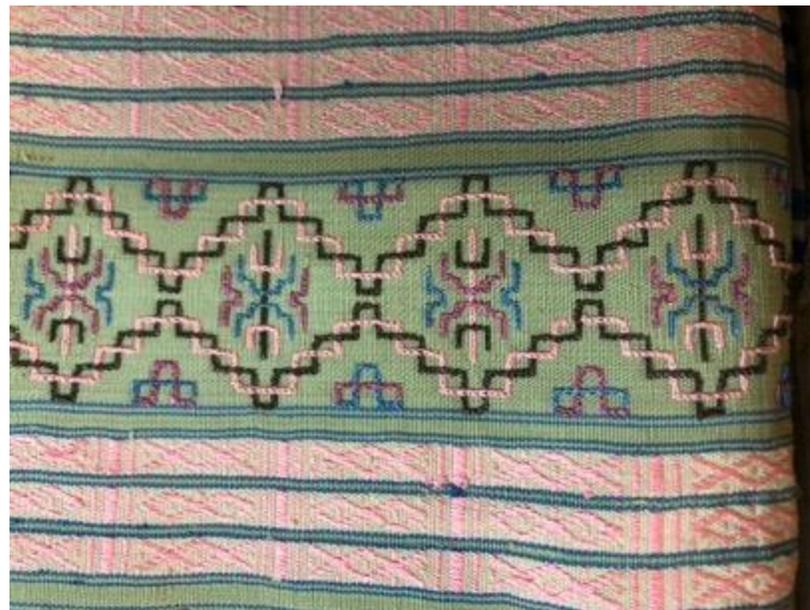
Displayed in a special box was a collection of natural dyes that were traditionally used. The display highlighted and mourned the disappearance of natural dyes. The development of synthetic dyes, bought cheaply from India has meant that natural dyeing is becoming a lost art.

It was here that the idea of learning more about traditional natural dyes was hatched.

Reading more about the dying industry, we discovered that the manufacturing of synthetic dyes is one of the great polluters.



Samples of woven natural dyes and patterns





The textile museum had samples of plants used in the natural dyeing process. It also had a recreation of a dye pot for heating some of the dyes.



The visit to the textile museum opened our eyes to the complexities of weaving and we were suddenly aware of some of the weaving processes that were going on in our neighborhood. We noticed our neighbor preparing skeins of wool for weaving. She was able to talk with us about her processes and demonstrate how to wind wool into balls. She taught us how to do this.



An indigo pot

After the visit to the textile museum we became aware that we needed to see the whole process of weaving and dyeing at a local level.

Much of the knowledge about textiles is passed down from mother to daughter. There is very little written down.



Kencho's house outside of Thimphu. He has workshops and the raw materials for doing natural dyeing. He has also planted the bushes needed to make the dye in the bush around him.

Local resources: Kencho Dekar

Part of the residency project is locating experts in the field and tapping into their knowledge. They are invaluable resources who often demonstrate techniques.

We found Kencho Dekar, a professional dyer who was researching and documenting the weaving and the natural dyeing process. He was very generous with his time and knowledge about natural dyes. He was born and brought up by traditional dyers.

He has published two handbooks about dyeing.

He has also written a book called, 'Traditional Dyeing in Bhutan: the natural way'. It focuses on traditional dyeing methods. The book is a rich repository for the different dyes and dye processes he has studied.

Kencho is also involved with a research group at the University of Cambridge, England. They are studying and documenting the natural dyeing processes.



Kencho was invited by the King to develop a training program for the Desups. He has a special program where groups of eight Desups learn all the steps involved in how to do natural dying.

Here they are sorting the lac and madder ready for boiling in large pans.



Lac is made from the laccifer insect. Found mostly in the east. After boiling the Lac they were able to separate the insect casing and waxy medium.

Dyeing supplies: indigo, madder and lac.





Samples of naturally dyed yarns.



The work of Kencho inspired us to find ways to raise children's awareness of natural dyes and how we can get color from plants.

We went for nature walks and collected plants we thought might give color.



We researched the many ways one might do natural dyeing with students and children. One way was ‘bundle dyeing’ and the other ‘solar dyeing’.

Bundle dyeing encouraged the careful selection of plant materials arranged on a piece of scoured and mordanted cotton. Selecting plants and rolling the cloth with the plant material around a stick was something even very young children could be involved in.

The bundle then gets steamed for several hours, left to rest overnight and carefully opened the next day. With bundle dyeing we could quickly identify which plants gave which color.



I worked with a class of trainee teachers to experiment with bundle dyeing. Wrapping plants in cloth allowed us to see which plants gave which color.

We were also able to plan for success with young children. For example; it was important to tie the bundles very tightly so that plants are pressured against the fabric.



Even very young children could be involved in all of the processes. First by collecting plants from nature walks, then by rolling them in the bundle and steaming them.

There were some interesting surprises when the bundles were unwrapped.





The student lesson had an extra component. They had to draw their plant before bundling it. This combined bundling with our experiments of making and learning to draw with charcoal .





A three tiered momo steamer managed to hold a whole class set of bundles.



Unrolling the bundles was always interesting. There were several surprises. For example, a pink poppy turned the cloth blue.



Solar dyeing

The other dyeing method we used was 'solar dyeing'. For this method we chopped up the plant and put it, and a piece of scoured and mordanted cloth, in a glass jar with very hot water and left it sitting in the sun for several days.

Each day the mixture is stirred. After several days the color has been absorbed by the fabric.



When we collected the solar dyed fabric squares from the two classes, we were in awe of the range of beautiful colors we had achieved. A 'key' was made so we could identify the particular dyes and their source.



The bundle dyed fabric squares were carefully arranged and appliqued on to a canvas backing with natural dyed threads.

Hopefully this brief background to the research involved for studying natural dyes is helpful and can be used in schools and colleges to introduce textiles of Bhutan.