



# The Chácara of the Ngöbe Woman

Handspun string bags from Panama

BY PAM DE LUCCO

Living in the provinces of Chiriquí, Bocas Del Toro, and Veraguas, the Guaymí people are the largest group of indigenous people in the Republic of Panamá. The Ngöbe and the Buglé are subgroups of the Guaymí distinguished primarily by language.

**T**HE CHÁCARA is an elaborately patterned string bag made by the Guaymí women of western Panamá from fibers that they extract from plants in the nearby mountains and spin by hand on their thighs. The Guaymí people are the largest group of indigenous people Panamá and are made up of two subgroups, Guaymí are the Ngöbe and the Buglé. In 1998, I visited a Ngöbe village and befriend Rosa Sanchez, who patiently took me through the entire process of making a chácara.

The origin of the chácara is unknown although it has always been a part of Ngöbe life. Every Ngöbe owns several chácaras of various sizes that they use just as their ancestors did. Gigantic chácaras take nine months to complete and are used as baby cribs. Medium-sized chácaras are used daily as shoulder bags. Large chácaras are for carrying produce from the fields. The full bag rests against the back supported by a strap across the forehead—a combination that makes a heavy load reasonably comfortable.

The cabuya, pita, and cortezo plants<sup>1</sup> provide fibers that can survive the intense sun and high humidity of the tropics. The extraction process, fiber and finished yarn differ for all three plants, and each plant has its own advantages and disadvantages. The softest and whitest fiber

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAN-INRENERE-CTZ.



Cabuya Plant.

Pita Plant.

**LEFT:** The sencilla (simple) and the pintada (painted) are two types of color patterns are commonly used when making the chácara bags. The sencilla, which a Ngöbe woman makes for herself, is worked in the round, with colored stripes spliced in as desired. The pintada, which is usually made for men, is more elaborate in construction and decoration. It is made of sections that are worked individually and joined together as each part is completed. This pintada depicts the sails on Christopher Columbus's boat.

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comes from the leaves of the Pita plant that grows naturally in the mountains and is also cultivated by the Ngöbe for its fiber. Although the fiber is difficult to work with, the soft *chácaras* fashioned from its smooth, lustrous yarn are worth the extra effort. While a Ngöbe woman may prefer working with one fiber over another, local availability generally determines which she will use.

### Harvesting the fiber

The first step in making my *chácara* was to collect Pita leaves and remove the flesh from the fiber. This had to be done in a single day or the leaves would dry out making it impossible to remove the flesh without damaging the fine fiber. According to the Ngöbe the best time to work with Pita is during a full moon when the leaves contain more water. So, in the pre-dawn before a full moon, Rosa and I set out, equipped with a machete and a pieces of hard cane gathered from the coast. Reaching the forest by sunrise, we got to work immediately.

Rosa used her machete to cut down the 8 foot long Pita leaves and I removed the thorns along the lateral edges. She then felled a small tree, stripped the bark off one side making a flat, smooth surface and braced the log upright against the trunk of another tree. This was to be my work surface. She made a “seat” for me from large fan-type palm leaves and used her machete to sharpen



According to Ngöbe tradition, unspun fiber is dyed on the day of a new moon and only women may be present. Although traditions may vary, the Ngöbe process for natural dyeing is similar to that used by any dyer—the dye plants are pulverized, the dye stock is prepared by boiling the plants and straining off the liquid, and the fibers are dyed.

my “scraping tool”, the piece of hard cane split in half. For the next eight hours I sat in the forest scraping leaf after leaf—I scraped hard enough to remove all of the green flesh but took care not to break the fibers. By the end of the day I had a sore back, sore arms, and one small hank of fiber. We washed the fiber in the river, letting the current carry away the fleshy green clumps that had accumulated from scraping.

That night I hung my fiber out in the moonlight to help whiten it. The following day I left it in the morning sun, beating it with a stick every half hour to shake loose the remaining bits of leaf. Repeating this moonlight/sunlight process for the next three days should have produced beautifully clean white fiber. Only mine was greenish with bits of dried leaf embedded in it.

### Dyeing the fiber

For dyeing, the Ngöbe use of various leaves, fruits, roots, vines, and bark to produce an extensive palate of colors. The fibers of pita and cabuya must first be mordanted in an acidic solution of banana seeds, cashew fruit, or limes. The dye and mordant plants are generally available year round and they must be used within two days after collection. The Ngöbe believe that fibers dyed during the day of a new moon result in more pure and intense colors, and many dyers wait for the correct moon phase.



Oral tradition states that the dying of the fiber is to be done by the oldest woman of the household who is neither pregnant nor menstruating. Other women of similar status may be present but absolutely no men are allowed within sight of the dye pot. Since I am a young, single woman, Rosa felt that it would be a waste of time and fiber to go through the dye process with me. Almost every woman that I met had a horror story of a hank of fiber that was brewing beautifully in the dye pot when someone, usually a man, had approached and the color was suddenly ruined. I'm not superstitious, but my day in the forest gave me a new respect for pita fiber and I didn't want to risk ruining even one precious ounce of it. Several women were willing to sell

me dyed fiber for twenty-five cents per leaf, so I purchased my colors and started spinning.

### Spinning the fiber

The fiber is spun ‘leaf by leaf’ if you're a novice or several leaves at a time if you're experienced. Each leaf contains hundreds of fibers yielding approximately ten two-ply eight-foot lengths of finely spun yarn. To spin the fiber, the spinner sits on the floor with one leg outstretched. The “leaf” of fiber is folded into thirds, secured at one end with a slipknot, and slipped over the spinner's big toe. The section with the end is placed off to the side and the remaining two-thirds form a large loop. Grasping the loop in the center, the spinner separates out ten to twenty-five fibers. Placing these fibers in the palm of one hand and applying tension, the spinner rolls the fiber between her hands forming pre-threads. When all of the pre-threads are formed, she slips the knot off her toe and unties it. She then ties a new knot toward the center of the pre-threads leaving two unequal lengths of fiber. The spinner slips this knot onto her toe and working the longer length first, she separates the pre-threads and



Spinning the long vegetal fibers from the pita plant, the spinner keeps the fibers straight and under tension by hooking a slipknot over the toe of her outstretched foot.

twists them one at a time. With the palm of her hand, she rolls the long, parallel fibers along her thigh in a downward motion while the other hand keeps tension on the fiber and allows the twist to enter. Each length is worked the same until all of the singles are formed. Plying is done in the same fashion, taking two spun strands and rolling them in the opposite direction. Any short fibers encountered during the spinning process are removed and crumpled up

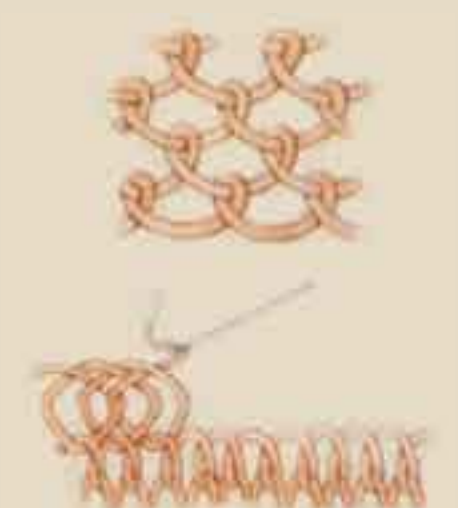
into a wad that is run along the plied yarn to smooth it out. The Ngöbe women make it look so easy as they sit together conversing, without even glancing at their work. Even with my experience as a handspinner I had to keep my eyes on my constantly, otherwise I ended up with an tangled mess.

### Making the *chácara*

The *chácara* is usually constructed without the use of a needle although many women stiffen the end by doubling over the last inch and twisting it on itself. The base of the *chácara* is formed with a series of connected figure eights and the body consists of row after row of connecting single loops (see figure at right). Additional lengths of yarn are spliced on as the work progresses or whenever a change of color is desired. Each of the many designs used by the Ngöbe has its special significance, suggesting particular animals, moods, fables, history, or local scenery.

The strap is assembled from several lengths of yarn that have been spliced together producing one continuous loop. Once again the big toe is used to keep tension on the yarn and to keep it organized. The strap is constructed by finger-weaving the right side bundle of yarn as it comes off the toe. This requires a lot of concentration for it is not forgiving of mistakes. The finished strap is attached to the sides of the *chácara* with several wraps of yarn.

I was impressed by the amount of work that goes into each *chácara*. I spent a total of two weeks with the Ngöbe, working continually, and in the end I produced only a tiny four-inch *chácara*. The gathering, extracting, dying, and spinning processes are so labor-intensive that many women have turned to fibers



A base of interlocking figure eights is repeated to create the desired width (about 7 inches for a medium-sized *chácara*). Común, the most common stitch used in constructing the body of the bag, makes it possible to create intricate color designs.

and yarn from the outside to make their *chácaras*. Commercially spun sportweight cotton is often favored, as it is readily available in a wide palate of colors. For their personal use, the Ngöbe prefer a *chácara* that they make by spinning the raveled fibers from discarded produce and grain sacks.

Rosa, like many women of her generation, has been making *chácaras* as long as she can remember. Her older daughter has learned to make a *chácara*, but her younger daughter shows no interest and this troubles Rosa; she fears a tradition is being broken. The lack of young interest in the *chácara* is something that concerns the Ngöbe as they realize that maintaining their traditions is the key to preserving the unity of their people. Many Ngöbe women are striving to locate a reliable market for the traditionally made *chácara* that will in turn secure the *chácara*'s future.

*PAM DE LUCO, a Registered Veterinary Technician, travels on and off the beaten paths of the world looking for adventure, fibers, and spinners, as well as mountains to climb. Along the way she has used a rubber boot heel as a whorl, traversed the Inca trail to Machu Picchu, and sailed boats through the Panama Canal.*