The Chácara of the Ngöbe Woman

Handspun string bags from Panama

BY PAM DE LUCO

The Chácara is an elaborately patterned string bag made by the Guaymí women of western Panama 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 in the Republic of Panama. The Ngöbe and the Buglé are subgroups of the Guaymí distinguished primarily by language.

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 plants¹ 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...

¹The scientific names for these plants are Furcraea cabuya, Aechmea magdalenae, and Apeiba tibourbou.

LEFT: The sencilla (simple) and the pintada (painted) are two types of color patterns 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.
A Ngöbe woman holds one end of the pita leaf while she scrapes away the green flesh.

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, and the fibers are dyed.

Dyeing the fiber

For dyeing, the Ngöbe use various leaves, fruits, roots, vines, and bark to produce an extensive palette 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 it 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 unites it. She then ties a new knot toward the end 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 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 burning 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 twisted 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 coordination, but 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 cooperatively, and in the end I produced only a tiny four-inch chácara. The gathering, extracting, dyeing, and spinning processes are so labor-intensive that many women have turned to fibers and yarn from the outside to make their chácaras. Commercially spun sportweight cotton is often favored, as it is readily available in a wide palette of colors. For their personal use, the Ngöbe prefer a chácara that they may make by spinning the raveled fibers from discarded produce and grain sacks. Rosa, like many women of her generation, has been making chacaras 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 chácaras that will in turn secure the chácara’s future.