



THREADS OF TRADITION: THE ART, SCIENCE, AND SYMBOL BEHIND TODA SHAWLS

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Introduction

Toda shawls from the Nilgiris are indigenous, traditional, unique and special for several reasons, particularly in terms of their craftsmanship, cultural significance, and the role they play in the lives of the Toda people, a native community from the Nilgiris Hills in southern India.

Distinctiveness of Toda Shawls

- *Traditional Craftsmanship:* Toda shawls are hand-woven using a technique passed down through generations. The weaving process is meticulous and requires great skill. The shawls are typically made from wool, sourced from the community's own sheep, and the weaving is done on traditional handlooms.
- *Distinctive Patterns and Colors:* The shawls feature intricate geometric patterns, often in red, white, and black. These designs are symbolic and hold cultural significance for the Toda people. They are not just decorative but are a representation of the Toda's worldview, with some patterns believed to have spiritual meanings.
- *Cultural Significance:* Toda shawls are a significant part of the community's identity and are worn by both men and women. They are often seen during important ceremonies such as weddings, rituals, and festivals. The shawls are considered a symbol of status and tradition within the Toda tribe.
- *Symbol of Protection and Identity:* The shawls are worn as a form of protection, with the geometric patterns believed to

ward off evil spirits. The Toda people take great pride in their heritage, and these shawls are an expression of their cultural continuity and resilience, especially in the face of modernization.

- *Sustainability:* Toda shawls are made using natural materials and traditional techniques, which makes them environmentally sustainable. The wool used is usually hand-spun, and the dyes are natural, derived from plants and other organic sources. This has contributed to a growing appreciation of Toda shawls in the context of sustainable fashion.
- *Economic Importance:* In recent years, Toda shawls have gained recognition outside the community and are sought after by collectors, tourists, and enthusiasts of traditional crafts. This interest has helped provide a source of income for the Toda people, while also raising awareness of their culture.



Fig. 1: Handcrafted Toda Shawl

Toda shawls are intricately woven and their making is deeply rooted in both tradition and natural processes. Here's an in-depth look at how the wool is produced, the significance of the red and black colors in their designs, and the scientific aspects behind the practices:

1. **Wool Production by the Toda People:** The Toda people obtain wool primarily from their own breed of sheep, known as the Toda sheep. These sheep are unique to the Nilgiris Hills, and their wool is prized for its fine texture and softness.

- **Breeding and Care:** The Toda sheep are specifically bred by the Toda people for their wool, as well as for their milk. The wool is sheared by hand in a process that usually happens once a year, during the cooler months, when the sheep naturally shed their coats.
- **Processing the Wool:** After shearing, the wool is washed to remove impurities like dirt and grease. Traditionally, the wool is then carded by hand using combs or a simple wooden tool to disentangle and fluff the fibers. This is followed by spinning the wool into yarn using a spindle, a process that requires considerable skill to achieve the desired thickness and consistency.

2. Why Red and Black?

The colors red and black, which dominate the Toda shawl designs, have deep symbolic, cultural, and practical significance:

- **Cultural Significance:**
 - ✓ **Red:** Red symbolizes life, vitality, and energy in Toda culture. It is also associated with fertility and the wellbeing of the community. For example, red is considered an auspicious color in ceremonies and is used extensively in the adornment of sacred items, such as the shawls worn during important rituals and celebrations.
 - ✓ **Black:** Black often represents protection, the earth, and ancestors. It is considered a grounding color,

symbolizing stability and continuity. It also contrasts strongly with red, making the designs visually striking.

- **Spiritual and Symbolic Role:** The geometric patterns created by combining red and black, sometimes with white, are not only decorative but also carry spiritual meaning. For instance, some patterns are said to be connected with the cosmos, representing the relationship between the heavens, earth, and the ancestors.
 - **Exclusivity of Colors:** The reason the Toda people typically use only red, black, and white may have to do with both aesthetic and symbolic factors. These colors are deeply entrenched in their belief systems, and the natural dyes they historically used were limited to these hues. Additionally, the materials (dyestuffs) available locally, combined with spiritual beliefs, may have influenced the choice of these colors over others.
3. **The Science Behind the Dyes and Wool Processing:** The Toda people rely on natural dyes to color their wool, and this process combines traditional knowledge with elements of natural science:
- **Natural Dyeing Process:**
 - ✓ The red dye comes from madder root (*Rubia tinctorum*) or pomegranate rind (*Punica granatum*). Both these plant materials are rich in compounds that yield red and orange hues when boiled in water. The roots of the madder plant contain anthraquinone compounds that are particularly good at fixing red hues onto fibers.
 - ✓ Black dye is traditionally obtained from sources like iron oxide (from rust or iron-rich plants) or indigo (though indigo is more commonly associated with other Indian textile traditions). The black dye might also come from natural tannins found in local plants.

- **Science of Dye Fixation:** The dyeing process involves mordants, typically aluminum, iron, or tannins, which are used to help the color bond to the wool fibers more effectively. This process involves a chemical reaction between the mordant and the dye molecules, ensuring that the color remains vibrant and doesn't wash out. The Toda people likely used local knowledge to optimize these dyeing techniques, even if they didn't have formal scientific understanding.
 - **Wool's Natural Qualities:** Wool itself has natural insulating properties, which is why it's particularly suited for the chilly climate of the Nilgiri Hills. The fibers are made of keratin, a protein that helps keep the body warm. Wool also has a natural resistance to odor and bacteria, which makes it a durable and practical material for both clothing and ceremonial purposes.
4. **Traditional vs. Modern Influence:** While much of the wool production and shawl weaving process remains traditional, there has been some influence from modern practices:
- **Technology in Weaving:** In the past, all weaving was done by hand, but today, some Toda shawls may be woven on power looms. However, the traditional methods of hand-spinning wool and dyeing it with natural substances continue to be central to the authenticity and cultural value of the shawls.
 - **Preserving Tradition:** There's been a resurgence of interest in Toda shawls in recent decades, especially in the context of sustainable and ethical fashion. This has led to greater attention on preserving the traditional techniques used in making the shawls, while also making them available to a wider audience.



Fig 2: Toda Shawl with a unique black and red dye

Several research findings have been published about the Toda hand-weaving techniques and their distinctive shawls, particularly their embroidery, known as *Pukhoor*.

Key Findings:

- **Cultural Significance:** Toda shawls, known as *Poothkuli*, are integral to the community's cultural and ritual practices. They are used during weddings, funerals, and temple ceremonies. The embroidery is passed down generations and holds deep symbolic value, with motifs representing buffalo horns, celestial bodies, and geometric shapes.
- **Technique:** The embroidery is done on coarse, unbleached, off-white cotton fabric using red and black woolen threads (occasionally blue). The designs involve counting the warp and weft threads to create intricate geometric patterns without pre-drawn designs. This craft, traditionally exclusive to Toda women, gives the fabric a woven appearance.
- **Motifs and Patterns:** Motifs are inspired by nature, religious symbols, and real-life elements. Common patterns include rabbit ears and black triangle boxes, used to honor priests.

- **Economic Aspects:** Toda embroidery serves as a source of income for women in the community. Products like shawls, bags, pillowcases, and clothing items are sold locally and online. However, lack of education and limited marketing strategies restrict the global reach of these handmade goods.
- **Preservation Efforts:** Toda embroidery has received Geographical Indication (GI) certification, ensuring authenticity and protecting it from duplication. NGOs like Keystone Foundation and government bodies have played a significant role in this process.

The preservation of Toda shawls, with their intricate hand-embroidery, involves both traditional methods and modern interventions to ensure their sustainability and cultural significance. Here are the main techniques and efforts:

Traditional Methods:

- **Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer:** Embroidery skills are passed down from mothers to daughters within the Toda community, ensuring the craft remains a living tradition. The process emphasizes preserving original motifs and techniques.
- **Use of Natural Materials:** Traditionally, Toda shawls are made using unbleached cotton fabric and woolen threads, which are eco-friendly and durable. These materials help maintain the authenticity and quality of the embroidery.



Fig. 3: Process of Toda Shawl Weaving

Modern Preservation Efforts:

- **Geographical Indication (GI) Certification:** The GI status was granted to Toda embroidery in 2013 to safeguard its originality by protecting it against duplication and counterfeit products. This certification ensures the craft retains its identity and authenticity while enabling premium pricing.
- **Role of NGOs and Government Bodies:** Organizations like Keystone Foundation, the Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation, and the Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam (Toda Welfare Association) work towards promoting and preserving the craft. They provide support in marketing, capacity building, and ensuring the craft reaches wider audiences.
- **Adoption of E-Commerce:** Toda products, including shawls, are now sold through online platforms, expanding their market reach. Efforts are being made to increase awareness among consumers about the unique craftsmanship involved.
- **Integration with Modern Fashion:** To appeal to contemporary consumers, the embroidery has been adapted for new products like mobile pouches, bags, and home décor items. This approach ensures that the craft remains relevant and economically viable.
- **Training and Workshops:** Workshops and training programs are organized to educate younger generations and interested artisans outside the Toda community, which helps in spreading awareness and creating demand while preserving authenticity.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Public exhibitions, collaborations with designers, and social media campaigns are used to showcase the uniqueness of Toda embroidery and its cultural importance.
- **Challenges and Future Directions:** Efforts to mechanize the process, if not carefully managed, could dilute the uniqueness of hand embroidery. Therefore, promoting handmade authenticity while addressing affordability is crucial for preserving Toda shawls.

Conclusion:

Toda shawls are a remarkable fusion of tradition, culture, and natural science. The wool is produced from the community's own sheep, and the natural dyeing process, rooted in the region's flora, is a perfect example of traditional knowledge being passed down through generations. The use of red and black colors is not just a matter of aesthetics but is deeply tied to the Toda people's cultural identity, spirituality, and beliefs. At the same time, the science behind the dyes and the wool's properties adds an interesting layer to this ancient craft, showing that there's more than just tradition at play—nature, chemistry, and a respect for the environment are integral to the entire process.

Overall, Toda shawls are a beautiful blend of artistry, tradition, and cultural heritage that hold deep significance for the Toda people of the Nilgiris.

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