
THE SACRED ART OF NAVAJO WEAVING

FOUR CULTURAL TRADITIONS



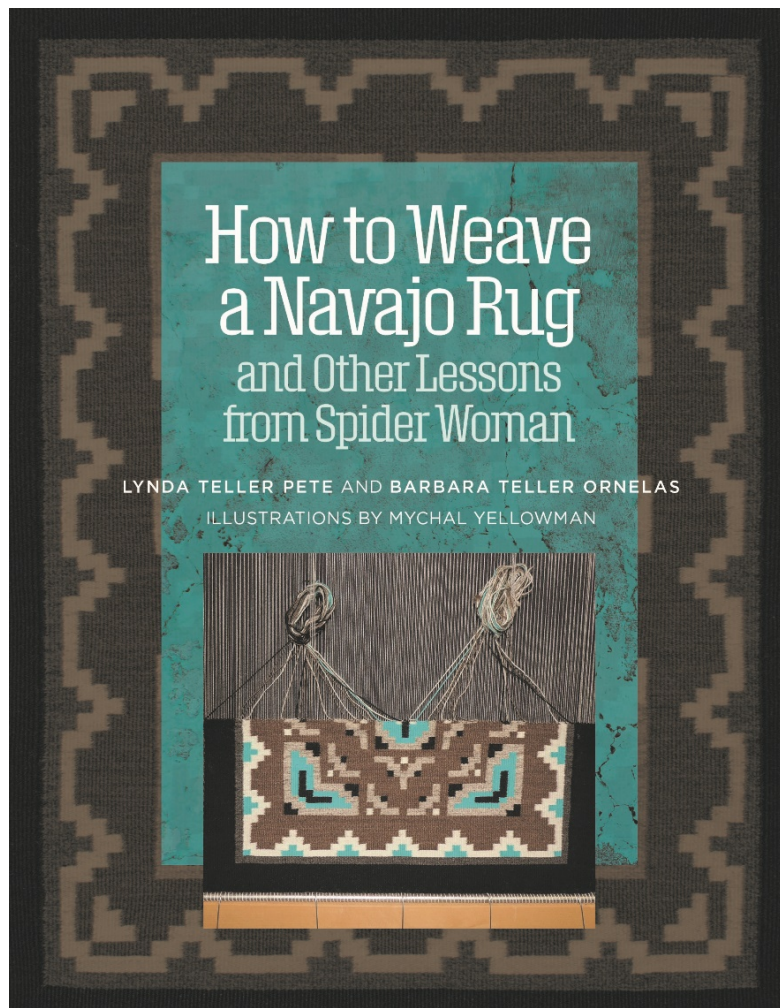
THRUMS

BOOKS

NAVAJO WEAVING — A LIVING ART

Navajo weaving is more than the technical steps required to weave a tapestry. It is more than the process of creating precise warp counts and spacing, correct placement of rod and heddle, and achieving symmetry of a balanced design. Navajo weaving is a holy endeavor filled with song, prayer, and ritual. These sacred practices correspond to lessons in each step of the weaving process, the loom as a living entity, and the powerful symbols represented in the warp.

Appreciating these ancient practices is integral to fully understanding the process of Navajo weaving. We have selected four cultural insights from ***How to Weave a Navajo Rug and Other Lessons from Spider Woman*** by Lynda Teller Pete and Barbara Teller Ornelas, Thrums Books 2020, and offer them for greater understanding and appreciation of the complex art of Navajo weaving. Discover the wisdom and beauty of these Navajo traditions.



A LESSON IN EVERY STEP

Spider Woman instructed the Diné people about how to make the warp string using a Bee'adizi' (Navajo lap spindle) and taught the Diné people how to weave. With the help of Spider Man, she taught them how to set up the loom, giving names that represented the natural elements and the higher powers of the universe. Together they brought the weaving art and the many lessons attached to every step of the process to our Diné people so they could sustain a good life. The very act of weaving protects us from laziness, poverty, hunger, and sickness. A finished blanket, rug, or tapestry in a home will provide an abundance of blessings.

Navajo weaving is a complex art form, and to Diné weavers, it is a living art form that dwells in our families through songs, prayers, and traditions. Every step in the weaving process is a lesson. We prepare our weaving materials: shearing sheep, cleaning the fleece, drying out the lanolin, using the sun to fade the color or shading the fleece to keep the colors dark, carding, spindling, and sometimes dyeing with vegetal or coal-tar-based aniline dyes. We warp our looms with songs and prayers and maintain our weaving tools. Family members search for trees that will become our weaving tools. Weaving encompasses our ability to acknowledge all forms of life, including duality, as we honor females and males and the equality of assigned roles. Weaving instills in us a quest for beauty, a balance of energy, harmony, and acceptance of our current state from birth to old age—the beauty of the circle of life.

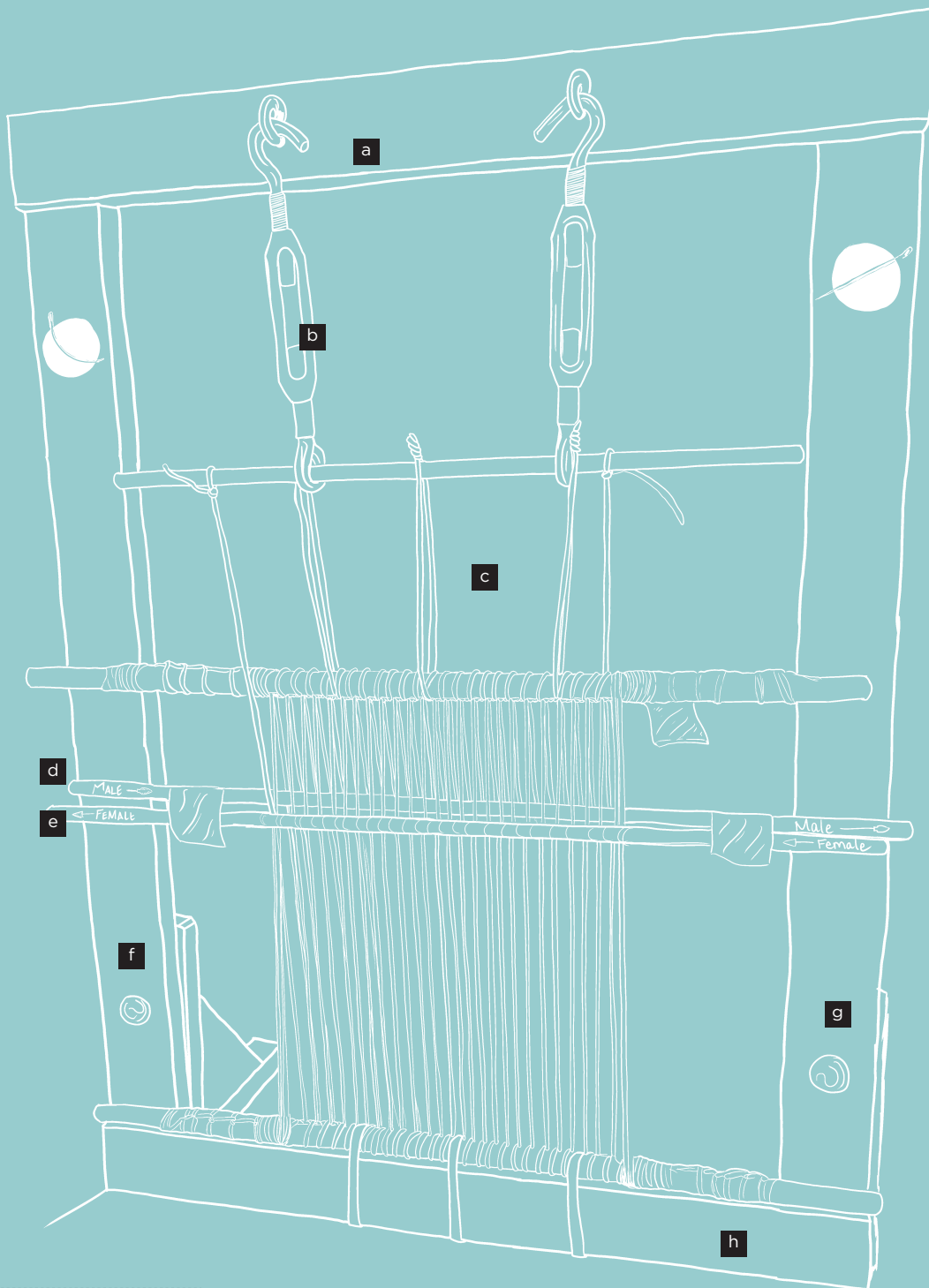


THE NAVAJO LOOM

*Spider Man made the first loom from sky and earth, from sunrays, rock crystal, and sheet lightning. The Navajo loom contains the natural elements and powers found in nature. It contains male and female qualities; these counterparts create equal representation of *liná*, Life. The loom breathes the prayers and songs of the Holy People and is, therefore, a living entity. It has movement, and it has direction. It is sacred, as it provides blessings and protection for the home and family of the weaver. The loom frame consists of four main beams or poles representing the four sacred stones of *Yoolgaii*, or whiteshell (bottom), *Dootł'izhii*, or turquoise (left), *Diichikí*, or abalone (top), and *Bááshzhinii*, or black jet obsidian (right). The bottom beam is the earth beam (female) and the top is the sky beam (male). The right side of the loom represents the night (male) and the left side represents daylight (female). Everything exists between the earth and sky.*

Within the loom, the warp yarns symbolize male and female rain. The upper part of the warp is dominated by the male, and the lower part of the warp is dominated by the female. The upper shed rod is the male rainbow, and the bottom heddle rod is the female rainbow. These rods represent our thoughts and our creative process. With both rods, there is balance to our way of thinking and to our creative process that allows balanced composition. Just as the Earth (mother) and the Sky (father) act as companions to balance the essence of Nature (family), the same principle applies to the loom and its setup. The loom is set up with good thoughts, songs and prayers, and the understanding that every energy you put into your project is a part of you.

*The Bee'adzooí (weaving comb) as the Nááts'iilid (rainbow) and the Bee' Ak'í'níltshí (batten) as the Nááts'iilid agodí (short rainbow) create the designs through replicating the sound of *li'ni'* (thunder). When all these natural elements come together, the result is beautiful growth that nourishes life just as the loom and the tools create beautiful textile creations to nourish a family. Because the loom incorporates many of nature's elements, anything related to weaving is ceased in the presence of rain, thunder, and lightning. These are the teachings of our deity Spider Woman with the help of Spider Man.*



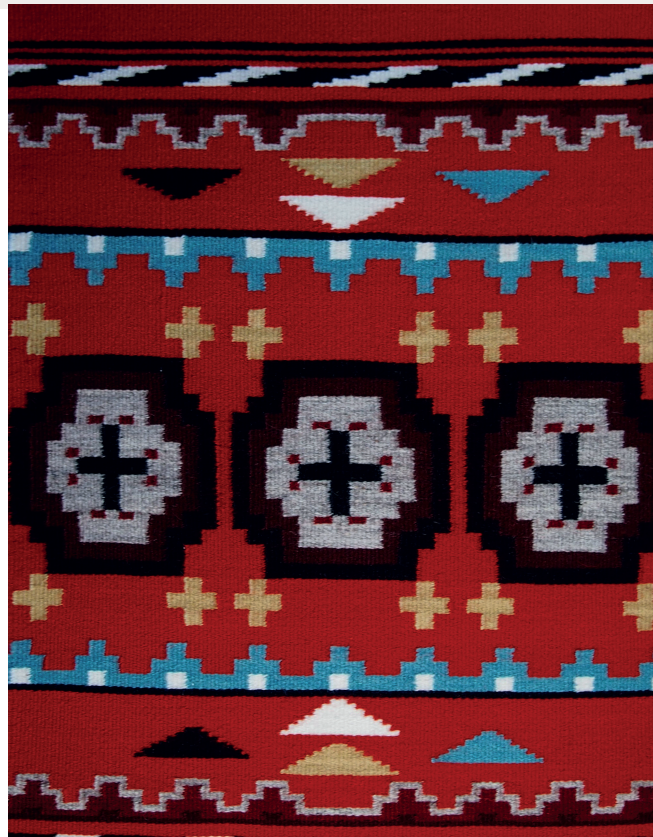
LOOM KEY

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| a Sky Beam (top beam) | d Male Rain (shed rod) |
| b Male and Female Lightning (tension device) | e Female Rain (heddle rod) |
| c The Clouds (space between the tension bar and the loom bar) | f Female Gravity (left vertical post) |
| | g Male Gravity (right vertical post) |
| | h Earth Beam (bottom beam) |

STREAKS OF RAIN AND LIGHTNING

The warp on a Navajo loom represents Níłtsá Bika' (the male rains) and Níłtsá Bi'áád (the female rains), the different types of moisture. When a storm is approaching, we see K'os Diłhxił and Ááh Diłhxił (male and female clouds) and Níłtsá Naajin (dark rains). When we see them in the distance, the dark streaks of rain come from the dark clouds and sky, and as the rain touches the earth, it nourishes all Earth's living beings. The streak of rain is represented by the Nanoolzhee' (warp). The Navajo word for warp, Nanoolzhee', is formed from the root word for hunting. Naalzheehí is the word for hunter and the word naalzheeh means to hunt. When we warp, we are actually hunting metaphorically: we are preparing to provide for our family with our weaving. The warp is held in place by Atsinilt'ish (the lightning) which is represented by the rope and can apply to metal turnbuckles as well because metal conducts electricity. Male clouds are represented by the upper tension beam connected to early dawn, blue twilight, yellow evening twilight, folding darkness, sunbeam, and rainbow, which are all connected to the lower warp beam that is female.

If you are right-handed, you will warp in the female way, inserting battens from the right. If you are left-handed, sometimes you will warp in the male way, inserting battens from the left. Each method provides an easy way to work with weaving tools. When textiles come off the loom, there is no way to tell if they were woven in the female or the male way.



WEAVING LIFE, WEAVING BALANCE

We begin with a foundation of weaving pairs of male and female warps together, a technique we call “two by twos.” We equate weaving the two by twos to a child taking her first steps. The balance of the design, the color combinations, and the patterning to achieve symmetry or asymmetry are symbolic of the teenage years. The finishing of the textile, which involves letting go of the male shed and then the female heddle, is equated to children leaving and moving on with their adult lives. Every action requires forethought, and we are aware that these actions also represent a balance of female and male energies; they parallel female and male fertility, childbirth, the rearing of children, and the final takedown of a textile. Cutting the selvage cords is equated to the cutting of the umbilical cord of a newborn.

