

# Wayuu Culture and Traditional Weaving

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## Abstract

The Wayuu ethnic group is one of the most important indigenous groups in Colombia, with a rich tangible and intangible culture, that has allowed them to preserve their rituals and traditions for decades. Traditional weaving is one of the main pillars of their Culture, it's a manifestation of their cosmogony and how they interpret the material world. Woven and knitted goods are present throughout the whole life of the Wayuu, they are entirely elaborated by women using different weaving and knitting techniques learnt from past generations.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Fashion, Wayuu Culture, Wayuu Traditional Fashion, Wayuu

## 1. Introduction

The Wayuu live in the Guajira peninsula, a territory between northern Colombia and northwestern Venezuela in the Caribbean, they occupy around 15.000km<sup>2</sup> of the Guajira department. The Wayuu population in Colombia according to the DANE 2005 census was 270,413, but actual data suggests that they already surpassed 600,000 people, women being the majority. The Wayuu represent 20.5% of the indigenous population (DNP-INCORA, 1997) being the largest indigenous group in Colombia

Figure 1. Wayuu People



The Wayuu are organized in clans inherited through the maternal line, each one is associated with an animal or a totem, represented using hieroglyphs, these besides being a familiar symbol is also used as a branding iron to mark the cattle. As explained by Díaz Guerra (2003) The Wayuu believe blindly in the myths and legends of their community, their life is governed by them. Dreams are extremely important, for The Wayuu dreams explain the reality of the collective and individuals, they grant them divination powers and they see them as visions of the future. The social organization of the Wayuu is strongly associated with their cosmological principles and methods of mythical representation.

The Wayuu live in *Rancherías*, traditional villages called *piichipala* or *miichipala*, these are small communities distant from each other, formed by groups of relatives of the clan. Stockbreeding is the most important economic activity, the number of goats, cows, horses and mules is a symbol of wealth and power. Other important activities to the Wayuu are weaving and knitting, they combine them with other daily activities, for example they knit when someone comes over to visit or when they travel.

## 2. Wayuu Culture and Traditional Weaving

### 2.1 Weaving and knitting main pillars of the Wayuu Culture

The Wayuu weave and knit different kinds objects such as bags, hammocks, blankets, male and horse accessories among others. The weaving and knitting techniques are inherited from the old generations among the families of the artisans and it's characterized by its great making-process, the complexity of the design, and the contrasting and bright colours.



Figure 2. Wayuu woven and knitted goods

Woven and knitted goods play a fundamental role in the Wayuu Culture because they take part in almost all of their economic and social activities, in the pasturage of the cattle, social meetings, celebrations, funeral rites, traditional rites and ceremonies. Weaving and knitting are meaningful activities, besides being the legacy of their ancestors it's the way Wayuu people express how they feel about their lives and how they interpret the material world. Each woven or knitted piece carries a meaning and a history that simultaneously expresses creativity, intelligence and wisdom. Intricate and highly elaborated pieces are symbols of power and prestige.

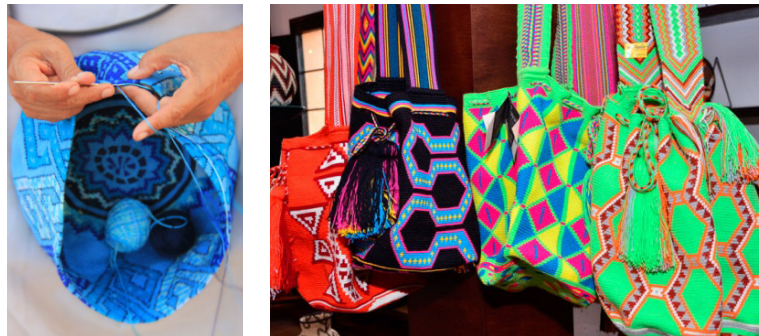


Figure 3. Traditional Wayuu knitting patterns

This type of art is fascinating for its colours, design and the complexity of the techniques used in its making. The Wayuu weaving and knitting practice involves the construction and execution of different materials, motifs and patterns, the knowledge of these techniques and the quality is associated to a high social status.

Kanasü in the Wayuu language means the art of weaving or knitting patterns. Wayuu knitting is rich in these traditional designs or motifs called Kananás. This ancient technique dates back to pre-Columbian period and is used in the manufacture of pieces that for their great beauty and colour are the most valued among the Wayuu people.



Figure 4. Examples of Kananás

For the Wayuu the Kananás are the most authentic expression of their culture, these abstract elements extracted from the material world are re-interpretations of the elements present in their daily lives, The Wayuu different elements from nature as inspiration to create these stylized figures of great symbolism, this includes turtle's shells, animals, plants among others. The more complex the Kanasü, the bigger importance it has, this is evident in the elaboration of hierarchical garments and mortuary ornaments, these garments have a high economic and symbolic value and are used by the most prestigious family groups.



## 2.2 Women and the Traditional Wayuu Weaving

The traditional Wayuu weaving is conceived and supported by the Wayuu women, in a few words to be a woman is to know how to weave and knit, a woman acquires this knowledge from her mother, grandmother and maternal aunt, they teach her how to spin and twist the threads, how to master the loom and to fabricate each one of the traditional Wayuu woven and knitted goods.

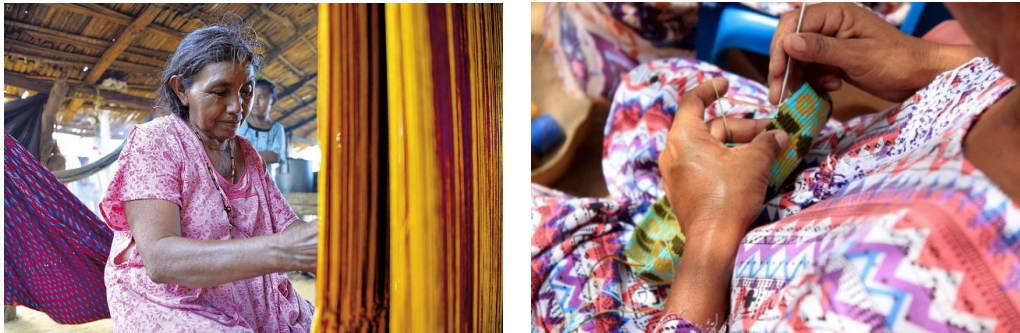


Figure 3. Wayuu women weaving and knitting

In the Wayuu society the woman plays a more important role than the man, is a maternal society ruled by women, this means women must do a great job as mothers and as members of the community, preserving the tradition and culture which is inherited and taught by and through women. The Wayuu is a traditional society the woman remains at home knitting and weaving, protecting her children and taking care of the house, her presence at the Rancheria is a symbol of respect and unity. As a mother she is responsible for teaching their children the traditions, customs, culture and knowledge, she raises her descendants with moral integrity. The continuity of the culture and traditions depends completely on the role that women play in the Wayuu society.

When girls reach puberty they are initiated in a special rite that has been preserved for centuries, this is when they go into a period called “enclosure”, during this period – that can go from a couple of months up to one or two years- they learn how to weave and knit, throughout this time, they can only be around their female relatives (mother, grandmother or aunts) who teach them the duties and social behaviour that a Wayuu woman must possess. After the enclosure period the girls are presented into society along with their newly acquired skills, those who demonstrate a special talent in the art of “Kanasu” become more desirable to her suitors.

A Wayuu woman should know by heart all the different techniques and patterns, this is what gives an added value, women need to be keen in the art of weaving and knitting in order to have the respect of their community,

The women also represent the spiritual dimension and promote peace and harmony; they provide orientation in terms of moral values and also play the role of shamans. It's believed that women have a special connection with the spirit realm and that they can predict the future in their dreams.

To summarize, the woman preserve, spread, sustain and transmit the Wayuu Culture, being the symbol of cultural perpetuity.

## 5. Conclusion

Traditional weaving is a key element for the Wayuu people, and it's extremely important because woven and knitted elements sustain the long-established rituals and daily life activities of their culture, in their usage the functions of these pieces are intertwined and become inseparably in areas such as work and relationships. Women support and forward this net of knowledge seamlessly from one generation to the next allowing the Wayuu Culture to preserve their core values and traditions throughout centuries.

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