Weaving a Tradition

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Weaving a simple design like this requires a lot of skill and effort

A visit to the village of Henavala relates a story of how a small group of weavers are keeping ancient skills alive.

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Fly whisks made of hana

The scorching temperature dropped a few degrees the moment we entered quaint Henavala. Modest brick houses with generous front yards stockaded with living fences flanked the narrow lane. The village should have been called Hevenalla meaning “shade”, I thought, as we drove into a yard occupied by a stately *bulu* tree, a breadfruit tree and a mango tree among others. It fronted a neat and simple house. The scent of *bulu* blossoms filled the air, drawing bees.

Henavala is known as the last bastion of *hana* weavers inSri Lanka. Many of the beautiful hana tapestries (also known as *dumbara* or *rata* mats) adorning designer hotels and homes are born in the pit looms of this pleasant corner of the world. The master weavers here could be considered national treasures – many in their seventies and eighties are award winners, addressed as *gurunanse* (teacher). That this group and their art is fast disappearing made the journey from Colombo worthwhile.

Like many of Kandy’s weaver communities, Henavala claims a lineage going back to Maha Sammata Raja, mythological first king of the world. Their ancestors were artisans who arrived on the Island to weave for royalty. It’s said that King Maha Sammata had an eye for beautiful mats and was patron of weaver communities.

The early weavers made mats and not tapestries. Mats were in demand back then because furniture was scarce. There were many types, a variety of reed mats and then there the sophisticated option: the *dumbara padura* (mat). This later became known as the *hana padura*. The first *dumbara paduru* were made not from the fibres of *hana* (sisal hemp, a long-leaved agave) but *niyada* (*Sanseviera zeylanica*). *Hana* was the alternative the weavers chose when *niyada* supplies began to run out. A native of Mexico, how it got to Sri Lanka is unknown.

Over time, the *hana padura* became even more decorative, moving away from simple patterns and geometric shapes to motifs inspired by the environment. Stylised flower motifs such as *nelum* (lotus), *namal* (na blossoms) and *mal gaha* (flowering plant); creatures such as the *hansa puttuwa* (intertwined swans); geological formations such as *wankagiriya* (mountains); items of daily use such as the *lanugetaya* (rope) and *lanuwa* (plaited rope); and cultural motifs such as the swastika were used to decorate them. It’s said that the beauty of nature inspired

one creative weaver to capture it in his weaving and others followed suit. The decorative tapestry format came later, over centuries of colonisation. Tapestries were common in the West and the lovely *dumbara* weave was perfect for wall hangings.

The simple loom in the patio of the home we visited soon came alive, reviving skills passed down the generations. The widow of a master craftsman demonstrated a simple weave of horizontal stripes.

There wasn't a single design her late husband couldn't do, she said with pride. His legendary skills are much talked about in the industry and she later showed us some of his tapestries and a book with photographs of his work.

Once this village was teeming with weaver families. Today, just 15 of the 80 households here actively weave. Many are skilled but have taken to other more profitable occupations. But with a little imagination, you can hear the clatter of the looms as the craftsmen toil to meet orders. Since even back then there was limited demand for *hana paduru*, orders were sparse and so weaving was never a full-time occuption – most of the weavers doubled up as state musicians. Like many artisans, they must have sung songs of their craft as they wove; songs that are now silent.

The loom looks rather primitive, and sure enough we learn that its design has changed very little over centuries. To be fair, there have been efforts to introduce a new loom, rejected by the weavers who prefer to stick to the one they mastered in childhood. Homemade, it stretches the distance of the patio.

The weaver sits at one end on two planks placed on the ground. Warp threads running parallel are separated by *aluva* (wooden heddles) and held in tension, while the *nevada* (shuttle) is used to wind weft threads under and over them. The weaver deftly manipulates the sley to press the weave together. Thin sticks twist and turn thread to create motifs. Only the master craftsmen and women make these motifs now, we were told. It's a tough job that requires much patience. Hence the search for new occupations and the wane of the craft.

Although *hana* plants grow in the area, the villagers travel some 65 km to areas like Hanguranketha, Rikillagaskada and Padiyapelella to collect the most succulent and fibrous leaves. The woman demonstrated how the fibres are extracted: all sharp edges are trimmed off and the leaf is placed on a flat log; she squatted at one end, holding the shaft in place with her foot, and neatly scraped off the flesh lengthwise

with a sharp-edged wooden instrument; it came off easily.

“It stings,” she warned, wiping her bare hands with a cloth. Soft but surprisingly strong white fibres emerged.

She continued to work, winding the fibres around her foot to keep them from knotting. The tedious task of stripping the leaf is usually undertaken by the women, although both men and women weave. The men gather *hana* weekly, usually from forests or other state lands. *Hana* stocks are also getting scarce, they say, blaming development.

Working fast, one person can strip about 50 leaves in half a day. The fibres are bundled into sheafs, washed and separated. Some are dyed into vibrant colours. Although the natural dyes of the past have been replaced with synthetic dyes today, the weavers still get their reds from the *patanga* (*Caesalpinia sappan*), yellow from *venivel* (*Coscinium fenestratum*), purplish from *katrolu* (*Clitorea terneata*) and black from crushing clay and *bulu* (*Terminalia bellirica*) together, boiling the mixture and allowing it to soak overnight. The natural dyes last longer, the weavers say.

New products have been introduced in recent years. Today, you are likely to see lovely *hana* purses, tote bags, table mats, even fly whisks, fans and screens.

Hana weaves live, though the struggle is on to keep the dream alive.