Blanket Basics

NAVAJO WEAVING OF THE CLASSIC, LATE CLASSIC & EARLY TRANSITIONAL PERIODS

During the 19th century, Navajo weavers of the American Southwest created colourful handwoven wool blankets for use as clothing, cloaks, baby wraps, bedding, furnishings, saddle pads and trade goods. This autumn and winter, 'Navajo Blankets of the Nineteenth Century' at the Textile Museum in Washington DC showcases sixteen blankets with designs ranging from simple stripes to dynamic optical illusions. Here the guest curator of the TM exhibition, anthropologist **Ann Lane Hedlund**, director of the Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, focuses on the development of format and design, raising issues of naming and identification.

The Navajo weaving tradition became established around 1650, but is not well known prior to 1800. In the course of the 19th century it can be divided into five periods: Classic (1800-1865); Late Classic (1865-1880); Transitional (1880-1895); Rug (1895-1950) and Modern (1950-present). It is the first three that are our main focus here.[1]

In standard English, the term 'blanket' covers a multitude of forms and functions. Small or large, of widely varying proportions, and made with many techniques and designs, blankets are flat rectangular fabrics that serve to clothe, carry, furnish, pad or insulate. In the context of Navajo studies, the term blanket can include *mantas*, 'chief's-style' blankets and their variations, fancy *sarapes* and *ponchos*, utility blankets, saddle blankets, and a host of other textiles.

Navajo words for blanket include *beeldléí*, *beeldládí*, *diyogí*, and *dah'iistl'ó*.[2] *Diyogí* also has connotations of shaggy, bushy or coarse, and can translate as either blanket or rug; we will return to this word shortly. *Dah'iistl'ó* refers specifically to that which is woven (or literally 'tied up') on a loom.

Blanket is the term generally used by writers for Navajo textiles dating before the 1890s, after which many weavers wove heavier trade items, considered as rugs instead of soft blankets. Within Navajo society,

1. Navajo classic poncho, ca. 1840-1860. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 1.38 x 2.08m (4'6½" x 6'10"). Weft yarns: two handspun, one ravelled; the ravelled yarn red cochineal-dyed. The Textile Museum, Washington DC, 86.14, gift of G. Pabst

2. Above: Navajo third phase chief's-style blanket, ca. 1870-80. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 1.99 x 1.47m (6'2" x 4'10"). Weft yarns: three commercial 3-ply red, three handspun; reds synthetic- and cochineal-dyed. The Textile Museum 1962.11.2

3. Right: Navajo late classic sarape, ca. 1865-1875. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 0.79 x 1.32m (2'7" x 4'4"). Weft yarns: four ravelled, two commercial, five handspun; reds cochineal- and lac-dyed. The Textile Museum 86.4, gift of General Mike Sheridan

blankets may express individuality or group belongingness. They can signal status or serve to blend a person into the crowd. From both Navajo and outside perspectives, they can also be further described according to their purposes, techniques, and patterns.

Calling something a 'wearing blanket' distinguishes it from bedding and other possible household functions. This emphasises the use of untailored rectangles of fabric as garments. Blankets that were woven either wider-than-long (2) or longer-than-wide (3) may both be called wearing blankets. Both types were, indeed, used as outer wraps by Pueblo, Navajo, and other native American people.

'Shoulder blanket' describes a blanket that is wrapped specifically around a person's shoulders. In general, Navajo shoulder blankets are those woven wider-than-long, such as chief's-style blankets, but why this is so is not clear or necessarily logical, because either format could indeed have been wrapped around someone's shoulders.

Another question is whether shoulder blankets might be considered smaller than regular wearing blankets. Navajo weaver Kalley Keams notes a restricted use of the term: "We call small striped blankets...'shoulder blankets' because they wouldn't envelop a woman entirely. Most of them are not large enough to wrap completely around you. To me, a 'blanket' would envelop the whole body, not just a part of you."[3] In contrast, many shoulder blankets are large enough to have flowed from shoulder to moccasin tops.

Judging by historic photographs taken in the late 19th century, the style of wrapping varied widely – some blankets had the top edge folded down to form a sort of collar; some were wrapped over just one shoulder and tucked under one arm; some were even wrapped under both arms and around the chest but not around the shoulders. Undoubtedly, variations were due in part to idiosyncratic style; some underscored the symmetry of woven patterns (as when a chief's-style design folds against itself in perfect alignment); others may have indicated a certain status or set of accomplishments, but this has not been documented or studied.

The use of two Spanish terms, *sarape* (sometimes Anglicised as *serape*) and *poncho*, occurs frequently in southwestern weaving publications for blankets that were woven longer-than-wide, that is, shaped like a vertical rectangle on the loom. Prominent from the 1840s through the 1870s, sarapes may be solid-woven fabrics (3) or they may include a central, woven-in, neck slit, indicating their function as a poncho (1).

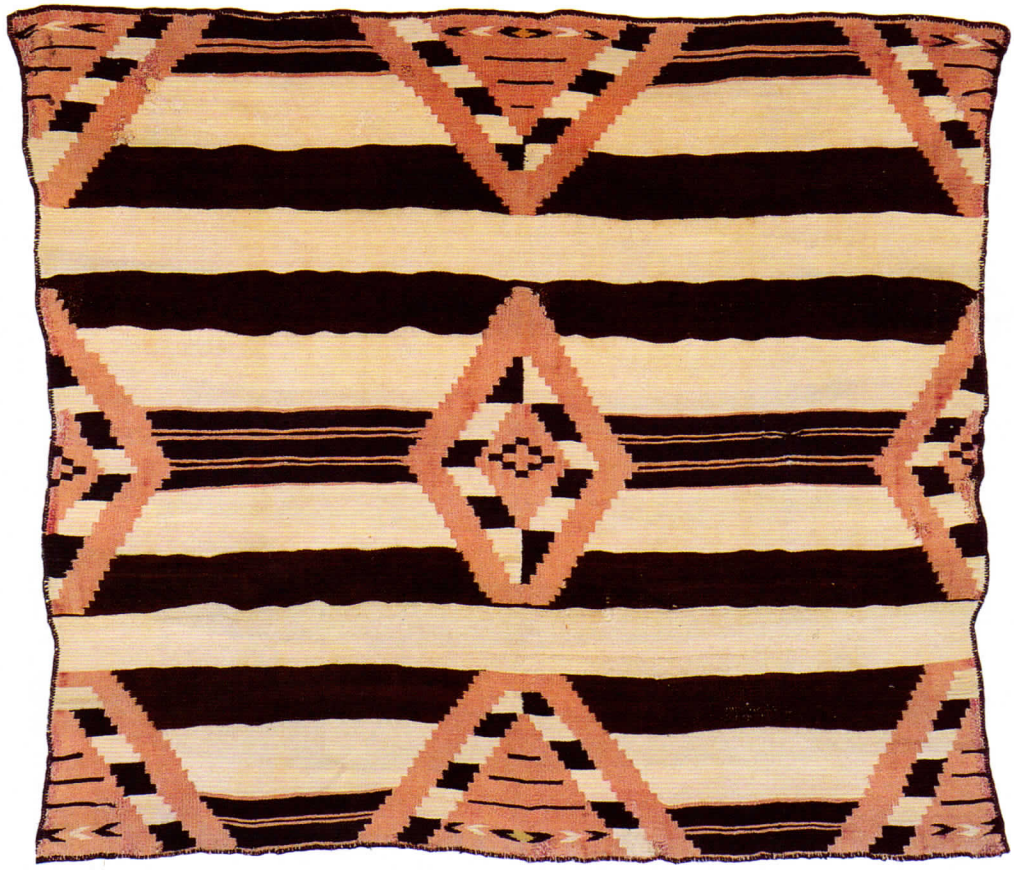
The *diyogí* (*diyugi*), was a utility blanket that saw rough service as bedding, door coverings for the *hogan* (Navajo home), saddle padding, baby swaddling, and everyday wearing. Patterns on the longer-than-wide *diyogí* tended to be simple – stripes or other basic geometric motifs. Made from the 17th century to the turn of the 19th, many blankets of this type were more often than not worn to rags and not preserved for later generations.

The *diyogí* and *biil* (two-piece

panel dress) are the two Navajo textiles for which the native names have been readily incorporated into English language publications. In current Navajo usage, *diyogí* also refers to all sorts of rugs, ranging from fine tapestries to coarse floor rugs and everything in between. This may be a long-term Navajo use of the word, given that the Franciscan Fathers recorded that *diyogí* not only included soft, loose handspun blankets but more tightly woven and refined *bayeta* and Germantown types as well.

The wedge weave blanket is a unique product of Navajo weavers during the 1880s. These blankets (7) are made with a unique technique in which the wefts are woven diagonally, at odd angles (instead of ninety degrees) to the warps. This slant automatically pulls the warps askew as the fabric is woven, creating scalloped edges and distinct design possibilities.

The wedge weave blanket stands apart from other blankets discussed here because the name stands for a technique rather than a purpose or design. Other published names for this eccentric weave have included 'lightning design', 'pulled warp', 'overstuffing', 'knock warp', and 'lazy weave'.[4] The Franciscans' dictionary does not record a name for wedge weave, but Navajo weaver D.Y. Begay notes that some Navajo weavers, in Navajo, call it 'dancing selvedge' or 'pulled warp'.[5]



4. Left: Navajo late classic sarape, ca. 1865- 1875. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 0.81 x 1.27m (2'8" x 4'2"). Weft yarns: four handspun, four ravelled weft yarns; ravelled reds cochineal and cochineal-lac dyed. The Textile Museum 86.5; gift of General Mike Sheridan

5. Above: Navajo third phase chief's-style blanket, ca. 1865-1875. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 1.70 x 1.42m (5'7" x 4'8"). Weft yarns: white, brown and blue handspun, faded lavender ravelled and cochineal-dyed, light green and yellow ravelled and vegetal-dyed. The Textile Museum 1976.30.5, gift of Colonel F. M. Johnson, Jr.

Trade blankets (and lighter weight trade cloths) are mill-woven and commercially marketed. These late 19th century products from Pendleton Woolen Mills and other manufactories in the United States are distinct from handwoven blankets. The irony of this name is that handwoven Navajo blankets were also traded among Navajos and to other tribes for generations and to outsiders since at least the 1840s.

Curators, collectors, dealers, and writers often categorise certain Navajo blankets on the basis of their designs. Some designs have then become associated with the blankets' possible users, such as chiefs, women, children and servants. This proves useful in identifying visual traits, but may not tell us as much about the personality or culture of the makers or users as we might wish.

Chief's-style blankets are woven wider-than-long, with characteristic broad striping and a variety of superposed motifs. They generally have two zones of wide black and white bands separated by a series of narrower blue, black and sometimes red bands along the ends and across the blanket's centre. Often, diamonds, triangles, rectangles, and other geometric motifs align in three rows of three motifs each across the blanket.

The Navajo word for chief's-style blanket is *hanoolchaadi*, which along with *ha'nischaad*, means 'carded', as in combed and cleaned wool. This word makes no apparent reference to chiefs or others with high social standing. In fact, official chiefs did not govern the Navajos; instead, local headmen informally provided guidance to small groups of people, usually extended families. The English use of 'chief' identifies a style, not a cultural or class distinction. It indicates the

6. Above: Navajo second phase chief's-style blanket, ca. 1880-1885. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 1.70 x 1.50m (5'7" x 4'11"). Weft yarns: handspun; reds synthetic-dyed, plus natural and vegetal colours. The Textile Museum 1962.11.1

7. Right: Navajo wedge weave blanket, ca. 1880-1885. Weft-faced plainweave with eccentric wefts, sheep's wool, 0.89 x 1.27m (2'11" x 4'2"). Weft yarns: handspun, natural colours, synthetic dyes, a possible vegetal bronze-green dye. The Textile Museum 1964.45.2

generally high quality of this blanket type and comes from associating these blankets with leaders and high status Plains Indians, to whom the blankets were often traded. Interestingly, as Kathleen Whitaker notes, it is more often Plains women who were depicted wearing these blankets in 19th century photographs.[6]

Chief's-style blankets are also called chief's blankets, chief pattern blankets, and simply chief blankets in the literature. To some, the addition of '-style' reminds us of the lack of chiefs in Navajo culture and the design-only quality of the name.

The motifs superposed on a ground of bold stripes determine specific chief's-style patterns, which are known as first, second and third phases (I, II and III), and sometimes a fourth phase (IV), with later variations common on these themes. The first phase chief's-style blanket is banded, without rows of isolated motifs (**8**). A second phase chief's-style blanket continues to have prominent banding, but with nine to fifteen rectangles added in three rows as design elements (**6**). Small at first, the rectangles later become larger, sometimes fusing into solid bands across the entire expanse (**10**) or creating grid-like patterns across the blanket's surface.

The third phase blanket is noted for diamonds and triangles that form a nine or twelve spot pattern, with three rows of three to six motifs in each row (**cover**, **2**, **5**). In the fourth phase style, the 'spots' grow larger and often coalesce into a pattern that almost obscures the banded background. Although not a full-blown representative the blanket illustrated on the front cover is verging on phase IV.

These design phases evolved over the course of the 19th century, with the first phase established by 1800, the second phase developing by 1850, and the third phase introduced during the 1860s. By the late 1870s, all four phases plus numerous variants were being woven. It is thus possible to find first and second phase textiles that post-date certain third phase blankets. Following 1885, the use of wearing blankets waned, but the chief's-style patterns persisted, commonly woven into trade rugs for use on the floor.

Woman's-style blankets (**10**) contain patterns very similar to those on chief's-style blankets. They are banded, with superposed motifs placed in three rows. These blankets tend to be smaller, the bands are generally narrower, and the colours muted grey and black instead of bold white and black. The foreground designs are also most often continuous across the ends and centre. The women's-style tends to occur somewhat later than the earliest chief's-style blankets, primarily during the last half of the 19th century.

Few photographs document women wearing or using these blankets.[7] As Whitaker notes, "The term was probably originated by early 19th-century traders, but in Navajo culture the assignment of any gender- or age-specific use to a textile other than the dress, or *biil*, is incorrect."[8]

So-called children's blankets have received much attention among collectors, but we have to ask whether small blankets should

be considered as children's blankets, or double saddle blankets, small blankets for trade, or something else. Many blankets measuring less than 30 by 60 inches (75 x 150cm) feature elaborate designs (4), more than would be required for everyday wear by children or for use underneath or atop a hardworking saddle. Native uses for small blankets could be myriad. Also, it is likely that many so-called children's blankets that were made beginning in the 1860s were actually woven as trade items or souvenirs rather than for native use, as they were highly attractive and easily portable for travellers. As Nancy Blomberg observes, "The shortage of wool, contact with soldiers..., and the establishment of trading posts may all provide clues about the proliferation of this particular size of textile" during the Bosque Redondo years.[9]

Some blankets, often dubbed 'slave' or 'servant' blankets, exhibit a combination of designs and technical traits from both Navajo and Spanish American cultures.

Individuals who lived in households away from their original culture may indeed have created blankets that share features of two traditions, such as being woven on an upright loom but with vertical serrate designs with isolated filler motifs.

It is generally assumed that such blankets were woven by Navajo women living in Spanish households in the upper Rio Grande Valley in the present states of New Mexico and Colorado. The women may have intermarried into Spanish families, joined Spanish households as servants through Spanish raids against Navajos, or been purchased as slaves from other Indian tribes such as the Utes. Spanish weavers who acquired Navajo designs and techniques through cultural exchange may also have woven certain hybrid textiles. Often writers presume that so-called servant or slave blankets were woven under such circumstances, as the story contains some romance and the name carries some cachet. Independent weavers, too, may simply have adopted foreign traits through other means of exchange.

Navajo weavers have created many differently patterned blankets, which have come to be avidly categorised by outsiders. While the Navajo language is highly descriptive, there are apparently no specialised words recorded for wearing or shoulder blankets, sarapes, ponchos, or trade blankets, as these are all English language categories developed through outsiders' observations. Neither are the so-called slave's, women's, and children's blankets, nor the four phases of chief's-style blankets distinctly categorised in the Navajo language.

8. Left: Navajo first phase chief's-style blanket, ca. 1800-1850. Weft-faced plain weave, sheep's wool, 1.78 x 1.45m (5'10" x 4'9"). Weft yarns: handspun, natural colours and vegetal dyes. The Textile Museum 1976.30.3, gift of Colonel F. M. Johnson, Jr.

9. Below left: Navajo second phase (variant) chief's-style blanket, ca. 1880-1885. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 1.77 x 1.50m (5'9 ½ x 4'11"). Weft yarns: white, brown and blue handspun, red ravelled; cochineal, cochineal-lac, and synthetic dyes. The Textile Museum 1963.24.1

10. Above: Navajo second phase woman's-style blanket, ca. 1880-1885. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 1.32 x 0.90m (4'4" x 2'11"). Weft yarns: handspun; natural vegetal colours, and synthetic dyes. The Textile Museum 1962.19.1, gift of Mrs D.T. Watts

Diyogí is a specialised Navajo term, but its use by writers seems to have been narrowed beyond its broad Navajo interpretation. Separate Navajo words do exist for saddle blanket, *'ak'idahi'nilí*, and for the handwoven saddle cinch, *'achxoshtl'óól yistl'ó*, which refer to their function (the former meaning "those which are laid on something") or their making (the latter indicating a type of weave). In fact, many Navajo terms exist for technical and process-oriented notions, but not necessarily for the styles that scholars and collectors

11. Navajo late classic sarape, ca. 1870-1880. Tapestry weave, sheep's wool, 0.81 x 1.14m (2'8" x 3'9"). Yarns: two handspun, two ravelled, one commercial; reds cochineal-lac and synthetic dyes. The Textile Museum 86.3; gift of General Mike Sheridan

happen to distinguish. This apparent gap deserves more detailed study.

The development of blanket styles during the 19th century derives from Navajo weavers' experimentation with design, exploring a variety of formats and motifs. The naming of many blanket styles resulted from the involvement of traders, collectors, writers, and others who attempted to visually distinguish and verbally describe the Navajo repertoire. The names rarely represent native interpretations, but they do reflect the observers' and collectors' own views that men, women and children ought to have distinct styles; that function should be made obvious; and that designs ought to develop in a series with a clear chronology. The blankets themselves represent a spectrum of design from Navajo weavers, whose own descriptions are no longer discerned or translated, but whose creativity clearly survives.[10]

'Navajo Blankets of the Nineteenth Century: Selections from The Textile Museum Collections' is at The Textile Museum, Washington DC, USA, from 5 September 2003 – 14 March 2004. A related symposium, 'Navajo Weaving in the Nineteenth Century: History, Materials, Design', takes place from 10-12 October 2003. For further information contact: jneubauer@textilemuseum.org

NOTES

1 | Since the dating of 19th century Navajo blankets is based more on technical and material data than on pattern, material information is given in the captions to each illustration in this article. My sincere thanks to Dr David Wenger who dye-tested all the red yarns. For further reading see Joe Ben Wheat, *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest*, Tucson 2003 (in press), and Ann Lane Hedlund, 'Wool Yarns in Late Classic Navajo Blankets', *American Indian Art*, 28(4), 2003. For a useful glossary, see Kathleen Whitaker, *Southwest Textiles: Weavings of the Navajo and Pueblo*, Seattle 2002. Three of the blankets illustrated here (**2**, **6**, **10**) were collected by Captain Harry G. Trout of the Second Cavalry, who was stationed at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, from the mid-1880s to 1892. For a broad overview of Native American and Spanish-influenced weaving in the American Southwest, see Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, 'Shared Horizons', HALI 43, 1989, pp.34-39.

2 | I use Robert W. Young and William Morgan's dictionary, *The Navajo Language: A Grammar and Colloquial Dictionary*, Albuquerque 1980, for the spelling and definition of these and other Navajo terms, and have confirmed and explored their usage directly through fieldwork among Navajo weavers on and around the Navajo Nation from 1977 to the present. The Franciscan Fathers' *An Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navaho Language*, Arizona 1910, provides an extensive set of weaving terms (pp.221-259) but these are rarely referenced in other publications. There is a recent trend to use certain native terms, such as *biil* (dress), *beeldléí* (blanket), and *hanoolchaadi* (chief's-style blanket). It is not clear what cultural nuances these terms carry for Navajo speakers – this is an important subject for future study.

3 | Eulalie Bonar (ed.), *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*, Washington DC 1996, p.140.

4 | Ann Lane Hedlund & Louise I. Stiver, 'Wedge Weave Textiles of the Navajo', *American Indian Art* 16(3), 1991, p.55.

5 | Bonar op. cit., p.170.

6 | Whitaker 2002, op. cit., p.32.

7 | Kathleen Whitaker-Bennett, 'Navajo Chief Blanket: A Trade Item among Non-Navajo Groups', *American Indian Art* 7(1), 1981, p.68; Whitaker 2002, op.cit., p.32.

8 | Kathleen Whitaker, *Common Threads: Pueblo and Navajo Textiles in the Southwest Museum*, Los Angeles 1998, p.69.

9 | Nancy Blomberg, *Navajo Textiles: The William Randolph Hearst Collection*. Tucson 1988, p.99.

10 | Blankets such as these were the focus of an extended research project begun in 1972 by Joe Ben Wheat, the late Curator Emeritus of the University of Colorado Museum in Boulder. His forthcoming book, *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest* (edited by Ann Lane Hedlund), University of Arizona Press, autumn 2003, documents in great detail the history and development of 19th century weaving in the American Southwest.