

THE DRESS OF THE PWO KAREN OF NORTH THAILAND

by

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The Karen are the most numerous of the minority peoples who live in the hills of North Thailand. Originally from Burma, they have been moving through the hills for centuries in search of new sites for their villages. Many are still in Burma, but those in Thailand number about 300,000.

There are several closely related groups comprising the Karen, the largest of which is the Skaw Karen. The next most numerous are the Pwo Karen, of whom there are about 100,000 in Thailand. It is the dress of these people that I wish to describe. My observations were made in 1968-69 in Dong Luang, a Pwo village close to the Burmese border and little influenced by contact with the Thai lowlanders.¹ Dong Luang was typical of the many other mountain Pwo villages in the area, but not, however, of lowland Pwo who wore different clothes again, the women retaining traditional garb while the men were indistinguishable from the Thai.

By tradition the Karen are subsistence farmers, so there is little cash for indulging expensive whims in clothing. Nevertheless, the Pwo have devised a most dignified and colourful mode of dress which compares with any in the hills. Single girls wear a long white dress, richly decorated with red (*Pl. 1*); men and boys wear black trousers and a red shirt (*Pl. 2*), while married women wear a red skirt and blouse (*Pl. 3*). Colours are bright—red, green or black for preference—and accessories are as elaborate as the Pwo can make them.

Most clothing is handwoven. The cotton is grown in the fields and spun into thread, or purchased from the Thai. If black or red cloth are required, the homespun thread must be dyed accordingly—with forest dyes if black, or with purchased red dyes. When these skeins have been

1) Data for this paper was gathered during anthropological fieldwork with my husband in Dong Luang village, Mae Sariang District, North Thailand. Fieldwork was conducted under the auspices of the Tribal Research Centre, Chiang Mai.

combed and rolled into balls, they are woven into cloth by the women and girls. They sit on the floor with legs extended under the loom, and with their backs supported by a wide leather strap. (*Pl. 4*) A girl learns to weave at about the age of ten or twelve years.

Pattern and decoration are introduced into the cloth in various ways. The red, geometric decoration on the girl's dress is created by inserting a number of tufts of red thread into the cloth as it is being woven, and then cutting them off close. The more tufts that are inserted, the more fluffy is the design. Then, intricate patterns are woven in coloured wools. Another form of decoration is simply a narrow cotton stripe of one form or another; or yet another, just a series of raised ridges in the cloth. Unlike other hilltribes, such as the Yao and the Mco, the Pwo do not decorate with embroidery, but with pattern woven into the fabric.

I should now like to look more closely at these clothes, and first at those of the single girl. Her dress consists of two long strips of white cloth folded in half and seamed down the sides and centre front and back, leaving holes for head and arms—a simple basic pattern which also characterises the boy's shirt and the married woman's blouse.

The appeal of this dress lies in its decoration, especially the fluffy pattern from knee to hemline and across the shoulders, (*cháj khé pháw*, lit. "the dress's fluff"). This pattern varies from dress to dress, but it does always seem to consist of squares or perpendicular lines. A line or two of this pattern is also to be found above the bustline, but it differs from the pattern elsewhere in that it is almost invariably a form of zig zag. *Plates 5–12* illustrate a sample variety of patterns found in this decoration and their combinations.

Below the fluffy pattern at the bustline is the yoke pattern (*cháj khé a*), lit. "the dress's pattern"—strips of plain red weaving in wool, alternating with patterned strips of diamond shaped squares woven in coloured wools. (*Pl. 13*)

Interesting variations occur in this dress and especially in the yoke pattern, according to the age of the wearer. In a baby girl's dress only a minimum of decoration is present: the yoke pattern will consist of just one patterned strip and two coloured stripes instead of the three patterned strips. (*Pl. 14*) As the child grows she will perhaps have three very

narrow strips of pattern and they will grow wider as she grows older. At the age of courtship—usually early twenties—decoration is at its most elaborate (*Pl. 13*) but after that, as the single woman grows old, the decoration again becomes rudimentary.

The single girl wears her hair long, tied in a knot on top of her head and covered by a manufactured handtowel held by a colourful headband. Her arms are laden with metal bracelets from wrist to upper arm and her ears are pierced for earrings. At her neck is a string of tiny black beads wound tightly round and round; sometimes she adds layers of white beads as well.² With her little red bag for pipe and tobacco slung over her shoulder she will go barefoot to the fields in wet season or dry.³

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- 2) The jewellery of both men and women is sometimes bought and sometimes made in the village. Earrings, whether of glass or beaten out of silver into round, button like shapes, are bought from Thong Su traders who cross periodically from Burma; so also are the black choker necklaces worn at the throats of both men and women, and the layers of white beads.

But bracelets, hairpins and tight fitting neckbands are made in the village, hammered into shape after scrap aluminium has been melted down into ingots. Boys often make these in their leisure time for their girlfriends, other girls buy them for themselves.

Most bracelets are just plain curves of metal, but some are more special, consisting of two curves twisted round each other. Both kinds grow shiny and smooth with wear. Girls collect their bracelets from childhood until eventually both forearm and upper arm are covered by their metallic shine, and they continue to wear them after marriage.

- 3) A prized possession of any Pwo is his pipe. Pwo of both sexes smoke pipes from childhood, but do not usually own one until the age of ten or twelve. There are various kinds of pipes—usually carved out of wood, either made locally or purchased from traders. Expensive pipes are decorated with silver, and even more expensive ones (Lua pipes) are made entirely of silver. A few Pwo do not smoke and prefer to chew betel instead.

Bags for pipes and tobacco are small red shoulder bags. (See Plate 23) They are adorned by a large section of coloured woollen decoration similar to the decoration over the shoulders of the married woman's blouse and by flowing tassels; there are also vertical stripes as in the boy's shirt and small bands of woollen pattern as in the yoke pattern of boy's and girl's garments.

Larger bags are woven for carrying goods food or clothing for overnight trips, or commodities for sale in the market. These are usually white with some form of red or black stripe. Medium sized bags are often decorated with woollen weaving, but the large ones are plain.

Blankets are also woven of cotton and decorated with stripes. Some are red with white stripes, others white with red stripes, but they seem always to be some combination of these colours.

When a Pwo girl marries she discards the girl's white dress for the red skirt and blouse of the married woman. If she never marries then she wears her virginal white for the rest of her life; it is a custom which emphatically demonstrates the low status of the unmarried woman in Pwo society.

The married woman's blouse is as elaborate as the white dress. Its decoration consists of a design woven in coloured wools over the shoulders, (*cháj khuu tháj*, lit. "the top of the blouse") and beneath it, front and back, another design (*cháj á dâuj*, lit. "the blouse's wings"). Beneath the heavily decorated yoke is "the red", (*thèe dāang*), three or four bands of purchased red cloth appliqueed onto the handwoven blouse and separated from each other by white weaving.

The shoulder pattern is always a series of diamond shapes, but the size of the diamonds and the intricacy of the colours and pattern vary. According to the informants, the younger the woman the smaller and more intricate the designs. The older she was the larger and "more ugly" were the designs. (*Pl. 15*). The second design is a vertical one and reminiscent of wings, as the name suggests. Again the complexity and intricacy vary, but usually according to the complexity and intricacy of the shoulder pattern. The most common patterns found at Dong Luang are illustrated in *Plates 16-18*.

The skirt is much less elaborate and has no colourful woollen weaving. It consists of two long strips of cloth sewn together horizontally and then down the side, into a tubular garment. It is gathered at the waist by a belt or tie of some kind which also holds it in position. It relies for its decoration on horizontal cotton stripes. The most noticeable stripe is a wide black one about midway in both halves of the skirt; it is called simply "the skirt's black" (*ning á sáa*). Other narrower combinations of stripes are called "the skirt's eyes" (*ning á mea*) and are concentrated in the middle of the garment between the black stripes. Less obtrusive single stripes ("dividers of the red", *chii á chaw*), serve to break up the solid blocks of red. The colours of these stripes are left to the choice of each woman, but yellow and green are common. If they hold further meaning I was unable to elicit it. (*See Plate 3*)

Accessories for the married woman include headscarf and jewelry, (earrings, necklaces and bracelets), and hair is long and tied in a knot on top of the head.

When meeting a Pwo boy for the first time, one notices only his hair. It is also worn long, but knotted over one ear and anchored with a shining metal hairpin. Much attention is paid to the grooming of its sleek blackness with a finely toothed wooden comb (or perhaps a plastic one), and when colourful headbands, necklaces and earrings are added, the exotic picture is complete. (*Pl. 19*)

The other special feature of the boy's dress is his tattooing, extending from navel to knee in a striking replicated design of dark blue tiger cats. (*Pl. 20*) The actual tattooing is a most painful process, but boys regard it as a demonstration of their manhood and say that no girl would marry them if they remained untattooed. Other decorative tattoos appear on their arms — perhaps lines of Karen script which wind round and up, or the coils of a long snake. (*Pl. 20*) (Girls, by contrast, have only a minimum of tattooing on their hands, arms and ankles.)

The boy's shirt is bright and colourful. Woven in red cotton it is similar in style to the married woman's skirt, being striped (but perpendicularly) with thin lines of black, yellow, green, turquoise or whatever else might contrast with red, in various combinations. The yoke pattern is like the girl's and woven in at chest level in coloured wools; but unlike the girl's, it consists of only a single band of decoration. Beneath it, tiny raised ridges of red change the texture of the cloth until they reach a pair of horizontal stripes near the bottom of the shirt, matching stripes in the yoke. Then the cloth is plain again for the last few inches. (*See Plate 2*)

As with the girl's dress, decoration of the boy's shirt changes according to age. A small boy will have but a rudimentary yoke pattern — a thin line of black diagonals — and the simplest of stripe combinations, but as he grows older they will grow more complex. By his twenties the band will be wide enough to fit several lines of pattern in it. When he is an old man only an insignificant stripe will remain.

This traditional red shirt is as often as not either discarded by boys in favour of a bright green manufactured shirt, or worn over the green

shirt. The black trousers and towelling headbands are purchased, too. In fact, the only handwoven article used by the boys is frequently the little red bag for pipe, tobacco or betel nut.

At marriage the clothing of a young man does not change, but as the years pass by there is a gradual discarding of the glamour of the younger man. (*Pl. 21*) The bright scarves, the necklaces and jewellery are the first things to go; but the most noticeable change is the cutting of the long hair, eventually into a crew cut, which no man does before he marries. The age at which it is done varies. Some continue to wear their hair long under a scarf into middle age or even old age, while others cut it off just a few years after marriage. Some say that it is cut in order to appear less conspicuous on visits to the lowlands, but whatever the reason, there is no mistake about the fact that glamour and a preoccupation with it are the preserve of youth.⁴

Festive occasions, such as weddings and New Year ceremonies, are celebrated in best clothes by everybody. But the gala occasions of Pwo Karen life when the young people appear in all their finery are the funerals. They gather from far and wide to sing round a bier night after night, sending the soul of the deceased to the afterworld. It is a time for courting and making new friends and all married people look back on the fun, excitement and glamour of such times with great nostalgia.

Initially clothes for funerals are the same as for everyday, but they are the newest and best in each person's possession. The girls wear their newest dresses, in which the cloth is still clean and white and the decoration bright red. And the boys wear their newest, blackest trousers and their newest shirts, usually a bright green one under the traditional red one. However there are additions.

The first addition to the girl's dress is a layer of long, bright red tassels, both front and back. (*Pl. 22*) Then, instead of the usual old towelling headcloth a scarf of bright green silk is substituted (if possible),

4) While Pibun Songkhram was Prime Minister (1947-1957), the wearing of distinctive ethnic costumes was banned. Although the decree did not affect people living in isolated areas, those visiting lowland towns were compelled to conform.

held in position by a band of bright ribbon. The newest red bag is carried, the same bracelets and choker necklaces are worn and layers of white ones are added. Boys also wear a green silk scarf or some other colourful one, and add additional hairpins, perhaps a big comb, and the layers of white beads to their normal jewellery. They also tie a bright red length of cloth round their waists. (*Pl. 23*)

The girl's hairdo on these occasions is strikingly different. Instead of the usual knot on top of the head the hair is padded out into a mushroom shape by a number of hair pieces, and then held in position by an armoury of shining hairpins. (This is not evident to the onlooker as it is hidden beneath scarves and headbands.) There is also a further elaboration of headgear in a series of floor length silk scarves of various colours which flow from the back of the head like wide ribbons. (*Pl. 24*)

Most glamorous of all, however, is the singing cape, worn over the girl's shoulder as a stole and heavily decorated with hundreds of little buttons interlaced with strings of pearly beads; a glistening fringe of iridescent green beetle wings completes the cape and sways and swings with the girl's movement.

With the addition of lipstick and powder for both sexes and a towel to muffle the stench of the dead, the young Pwo go off to sing and to court, looking very grand indeed. (*Pl. 24*)

No discussion of Pwo dress would be complete without mention of the Pwo genius for improvisation, necessitated by subsistence economy. The bracelets demonstrate it clearly. Most hill peoples are laden with valuable silver neckpieces and bracelets which the Pwo could never afford. But they are not to be outdone and hammer theirs out of aluminium, bedecking themselves with as many as their arms will hold. One also suspects that the original inspiration of the singing cape was the jewel and sequin encrusted richness of the Burmese and Mon courts. But the Pwo manage a similar effect with old buttons, cheap pearly beads and beetle wings.

This love of the colourful, rich and dramatic in clothes contrasts markedly with the style of the Skaw Karen, a group with which the Pwo are often very closely associated. Skaw clothes are basically similar, consisting of the same white dress, married woman's skirt and blouse, and

man's Karen shirt and black trousers, but their colours and decoration are quiet, almost austere, by comparison with those of the Pao. In fact the Pwo are disdainful of the Skaw "drabness" and attribute to it the infrequency of intermarriage between Skaw and Pwo. Why they should be so different is difficult to explain; certainly the bright Pwo dress contrasts also with the Pwo outlook on life, which is generally pessimistic and sad.

It is also interesting to note the conservatism of the dress of women as opposed to that of men. Whereas the women are unmistakably Pwo anywhere, the men could frequently be mistaken for Thai when they discard their red shirt and chop off their long hair. This is no doubt a result of the greater mobility of the men.

There is another aspect of Karen dress which is of significance. Unlike Yao embroideries which represent ancestral figures and ancient myths, the Pwo patterns hold no intrinsic meaning.⁵ Their names are merely descriptive of their forms — "Squares", "Tiny Little Squares", "Squares with Diagonals" and so on — and their function is purely decorative. Nor are position, status, lineage or locality acknowledged; no one is singled out from his peers except in so far as wealth enables some young people to afford more finery than their friends.⁶

But there is a correlation between age and ornamentation. Decoration is at its height during young adulthood, presumably when beauty is at its height. During childhood and old age it is merely rudimentary, a reflection of undeveloped beauty and the faded beauty of age.

Such then are the clothes of the Pwo Karen. Whether old, faded and worn, or bright and new, they are worn with great dignity and pride. At times one even suspects them of hidden significances, as they are one of the few unique aspects of Pwo Karen life.

5) Jacqueline Butler, *Yao Design* (Siam Society, Bangkok, 1970), p. 4.

6) This egalitarianism of the Karen generally was also noted by Marlowe, David H. "In the Mosaic, Cognitive Bases of S'Kaw Karen-North Thai Relationships" in C.F. Keyes (ed.) *A Pivot or Marginal People: The Place of the Karens in Sth. East Asia* (In Press).



Plate 1. A Pwo Karen girl.



Plate 2. Pwo Karen boy.



Plate 3. Pwo Karen married woman.

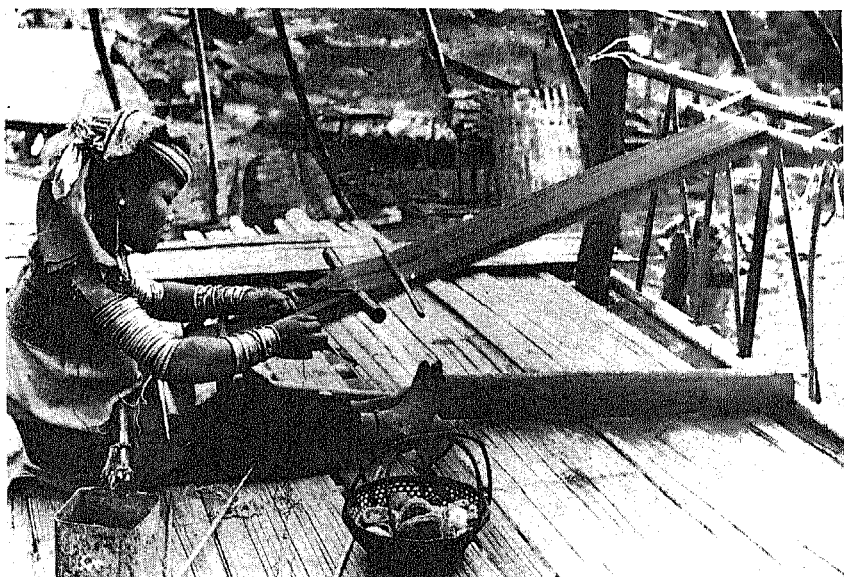


Plate 4. Pwo Karen loom.

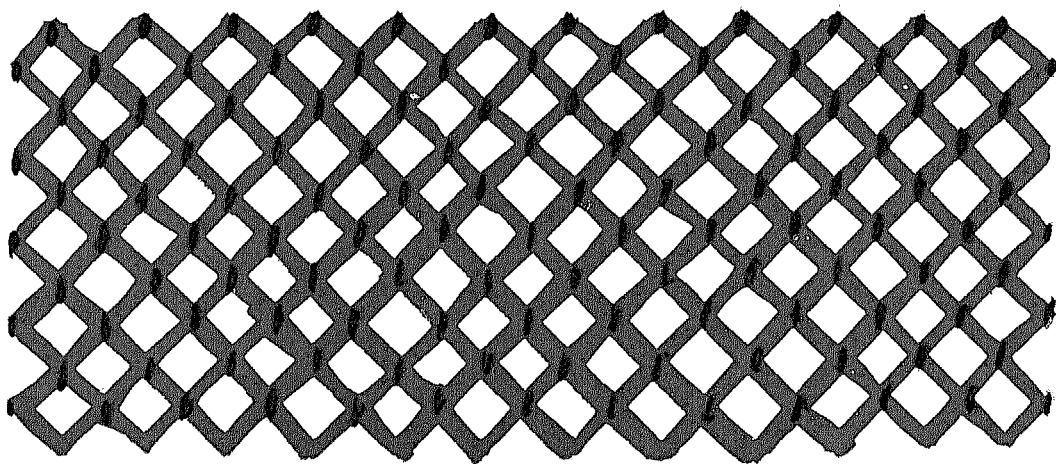
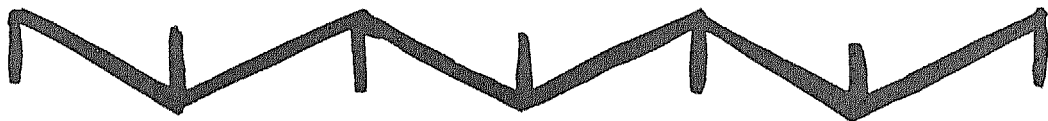
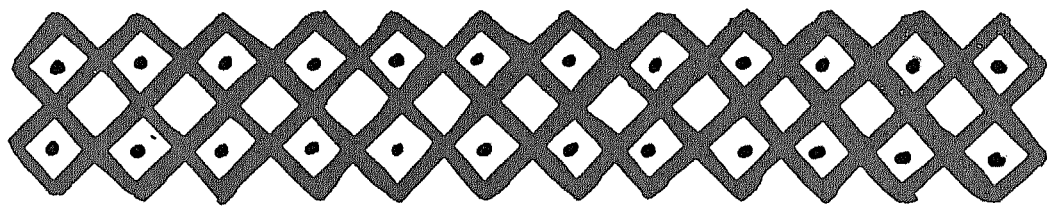


Plate 5. Fluffy red patterns on girl's dress—"Tiny Little Squares" on the shoulder, "Zig Zags" at the yoke, and "Tiny Little Squares" at the hem.

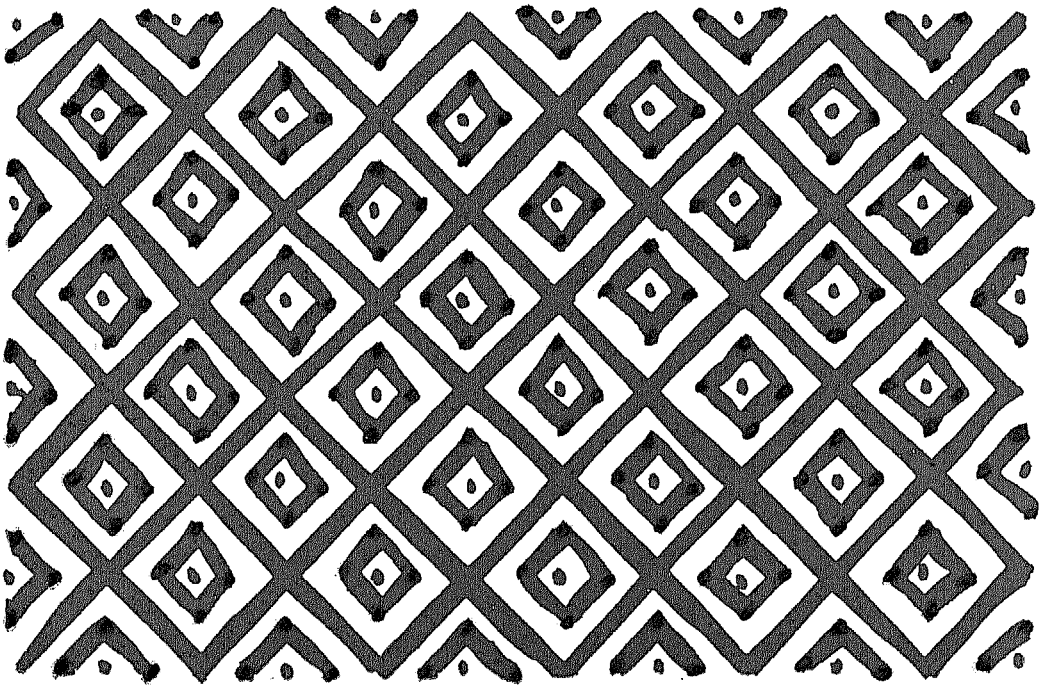
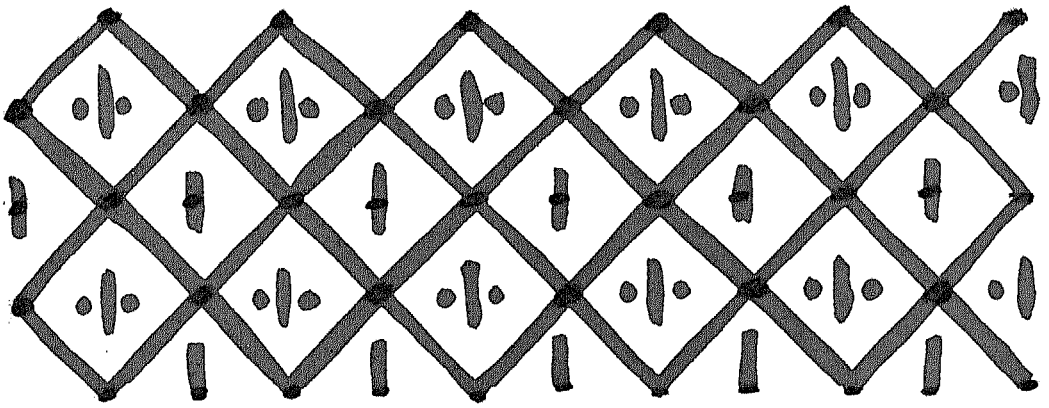


Plate 6. Fluffy red patterns on girl's dress—"Squares with Diagonals" at the shoulder, "Zig Zags" at the yoke, and "Double Squares" at the hem.

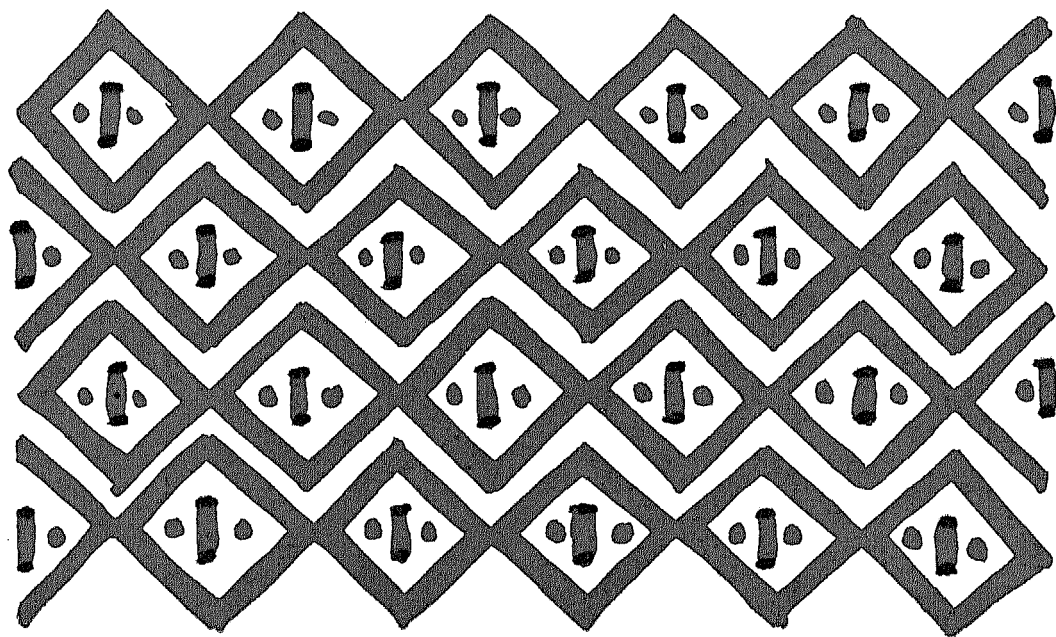


Plate 7. Fluffy red patterns on the girl's dress—"Perpendiculars" at the shoulder, "Zig Zags" at the yoke, and "Horizontal Lines of Squares" at the hem.

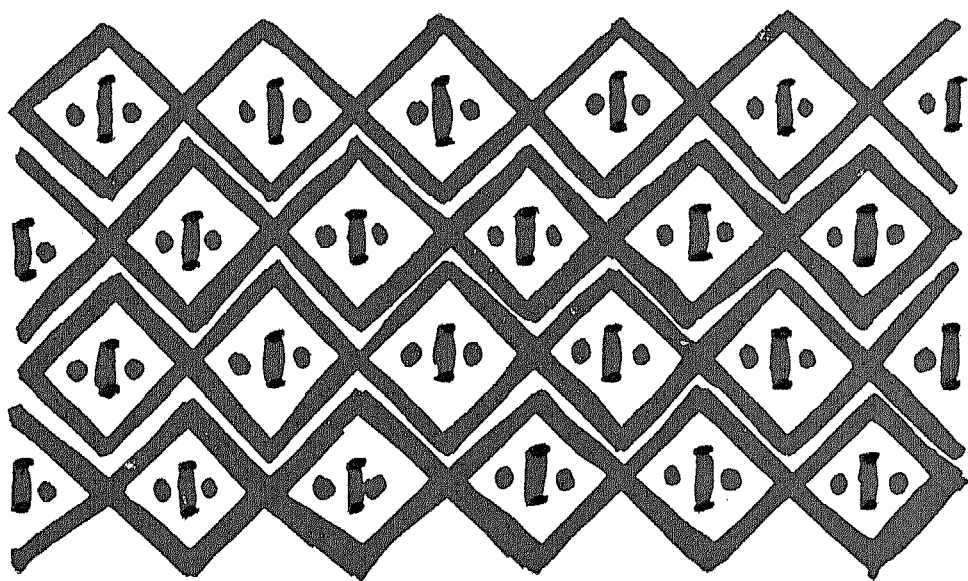
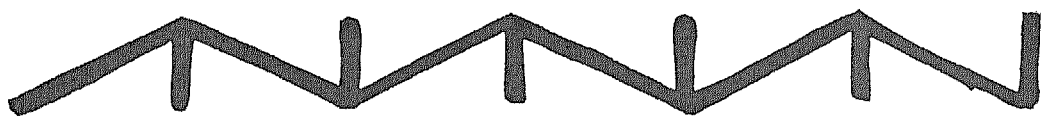
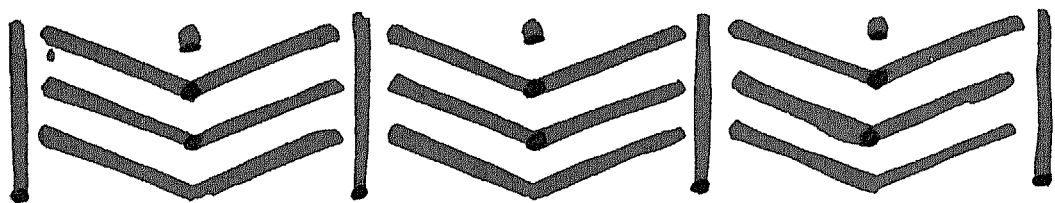


Plate 8. Fluffy red patterns on the girl's dress—"Zig Zags" on the shoulder, and at the yoke, and "Horizontal Lines of Squares" at the hem.

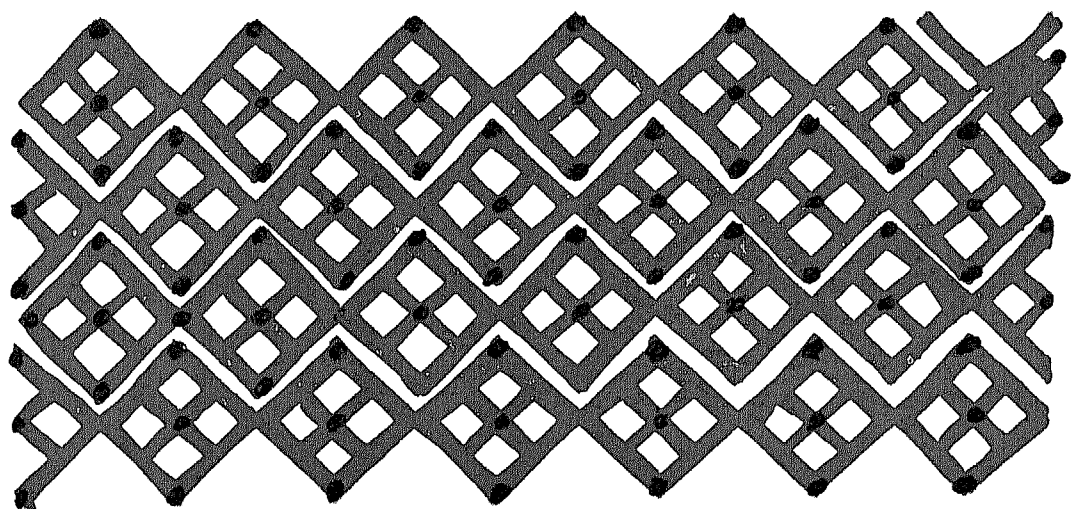
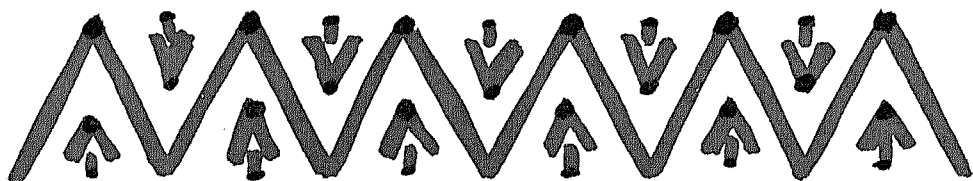
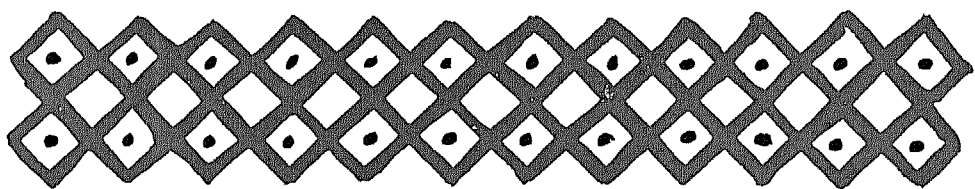


Plate 9. Fluffy red patterns on the girl's dress—"Tiny Little Squares" at the shoulder, "Zig Zags" at the yoke, and "Horizontal Lines of Squares" at the hem.

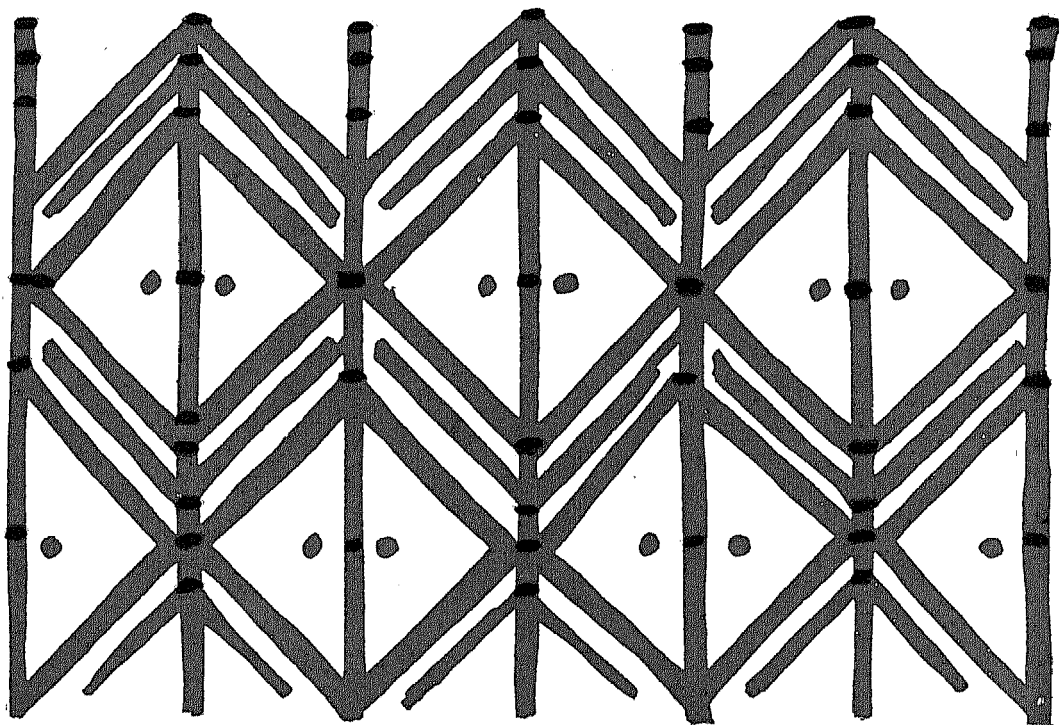
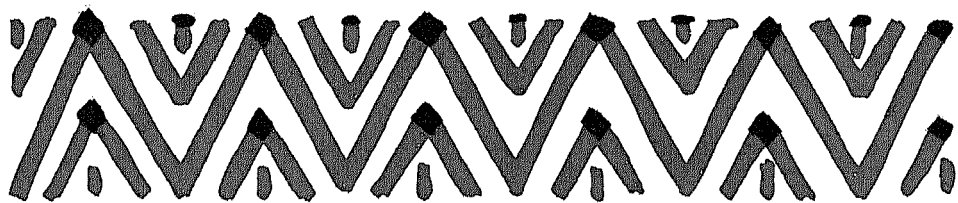
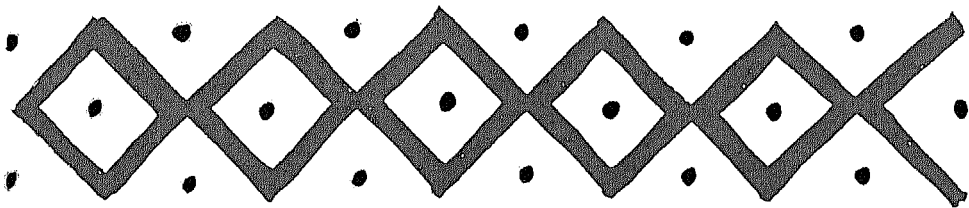


Plate 10. Fluffy red patterns on girl's dress—"Squares" at the shoulder, "Zig Zags" at the yoke, and "Perpendiculars" at the hem.

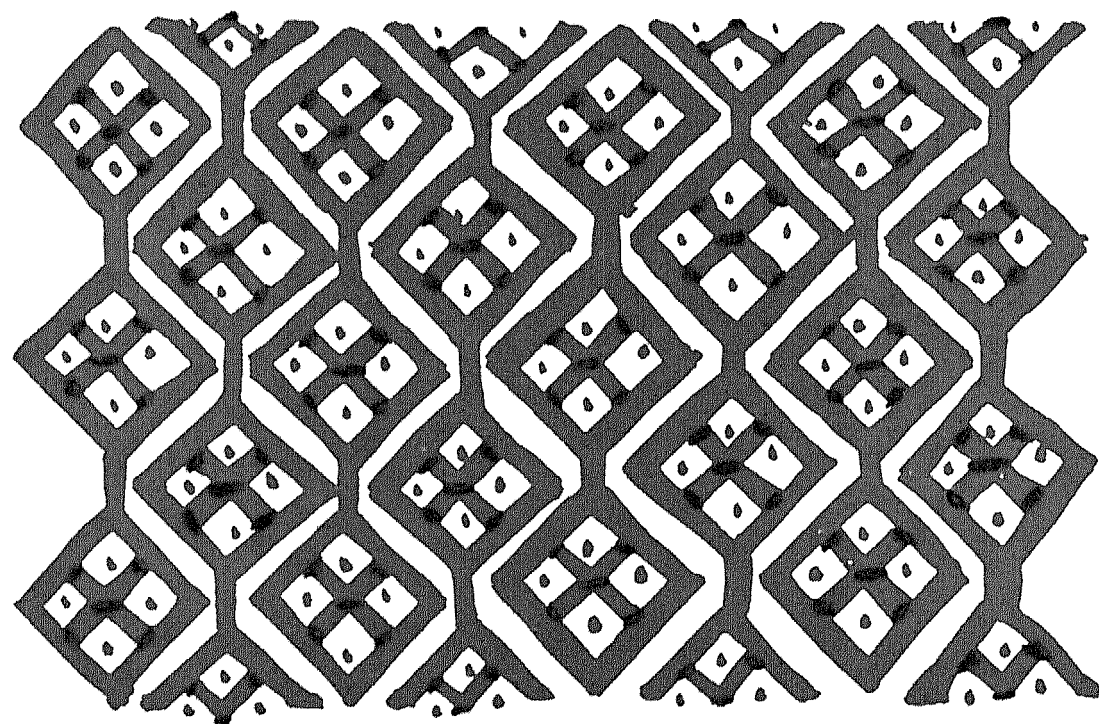
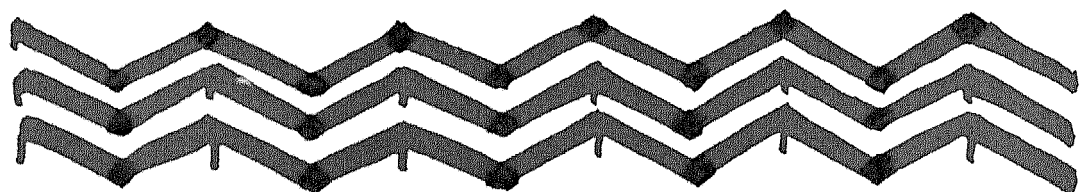
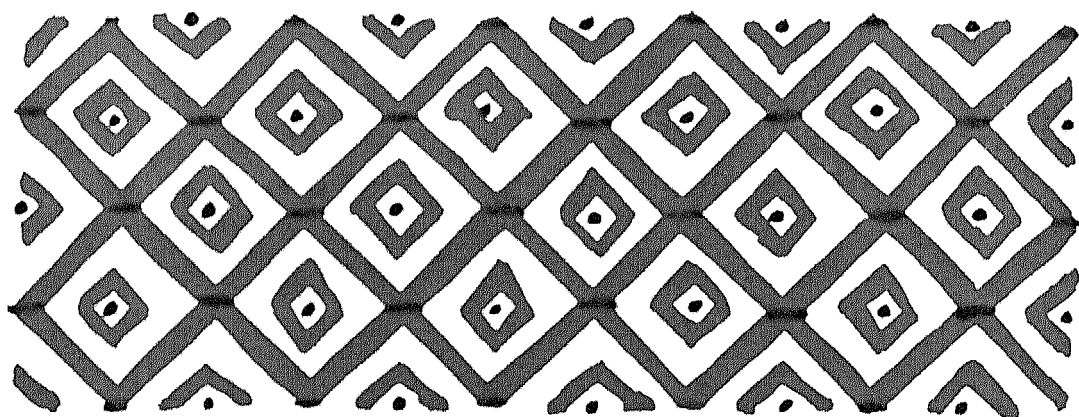


Plate 11. Fluffy red patterns on girl's dress—"Double Squares" at the shoulder, "Zig Zags" at the yoke, and "Lines of Squares" at the hem.

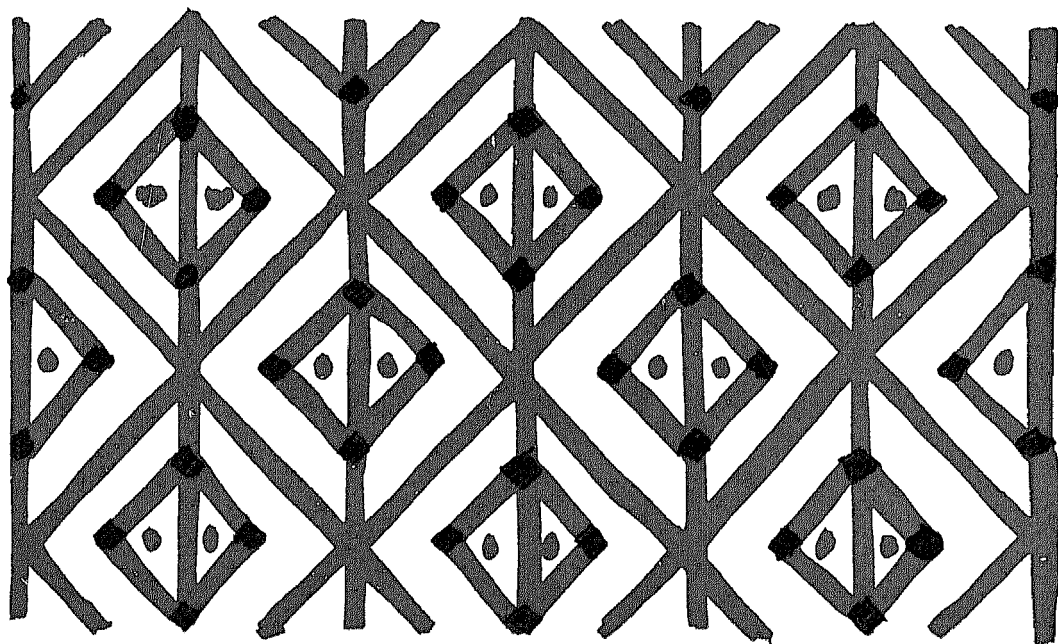
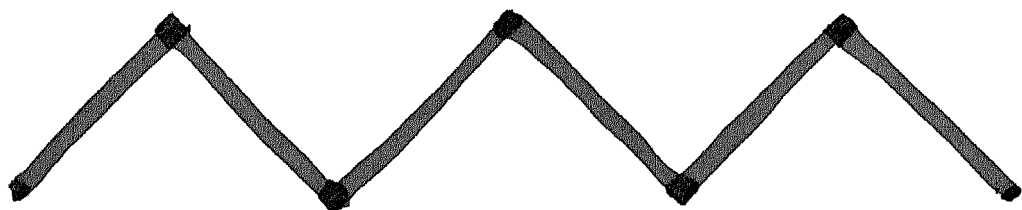
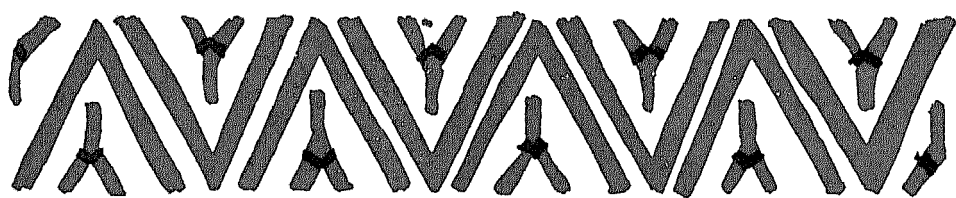


Plate 12. Fluffy red patterns on girl's dress—"Zig Zags" on the shoulder, and at the yoke, and "Perpendiculars" at the hem.



Plate 13. Pattern on the yoke of single girl's dress.



Plate 14. Simple decoration on the dresses of small girls.



Plate 15. Old married Pwo woman - the design on her blouse is a large one.

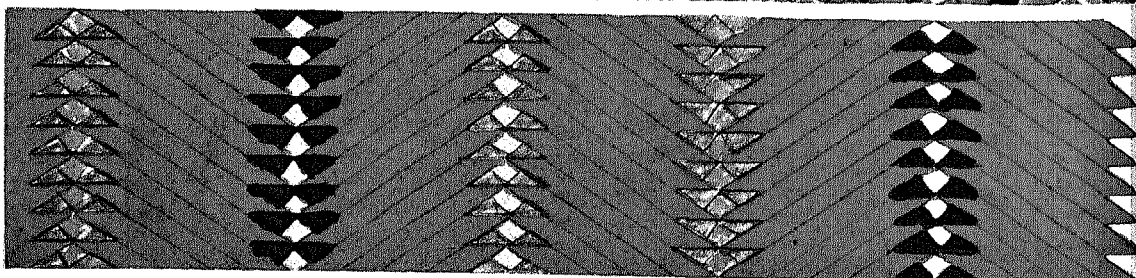
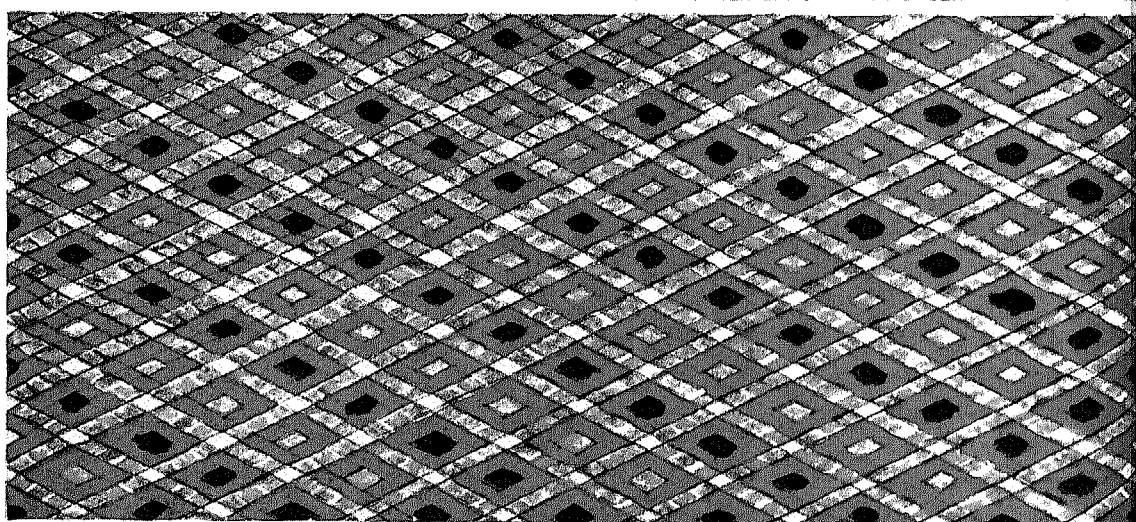
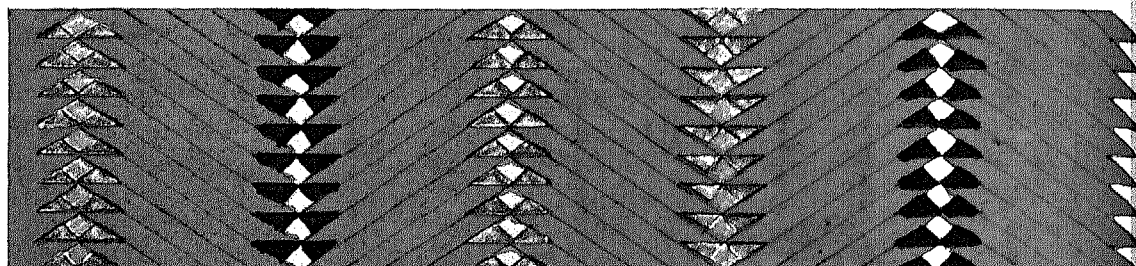


Plate 16. The coloured woven patterns of the married woman's blouse. The shoulder pattern is called "Squares with small Sides". Like the pattern found at the hem of the girl's dress, this pattern is invariably based on "squares" (or diamond shaped rectangles), which vary in size and trimmings—some are simple squares, while others have squares within squares, or coloured diagonals.

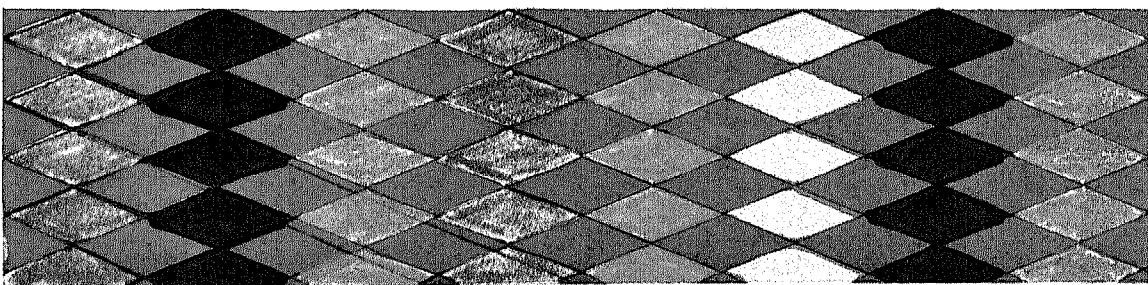
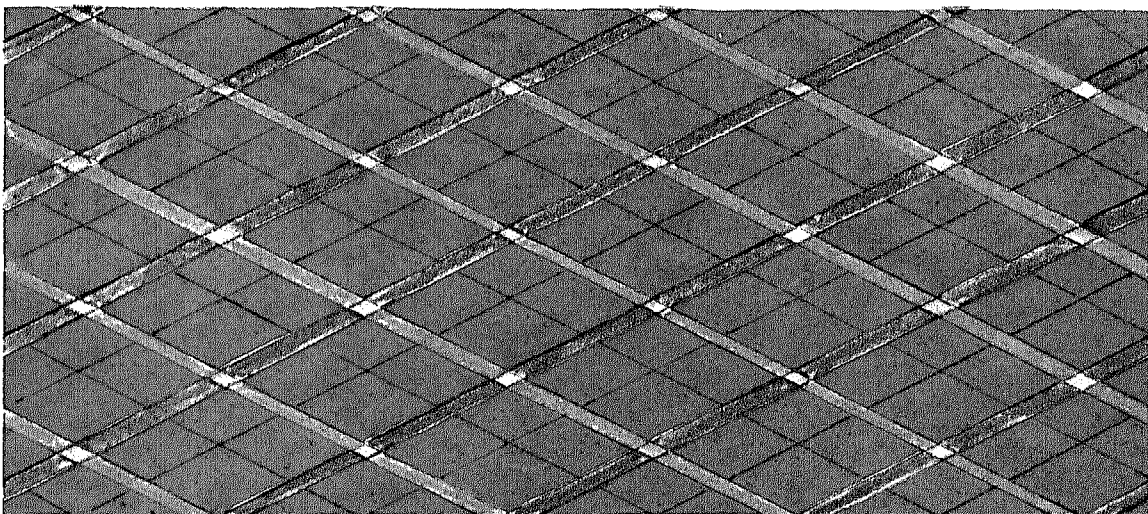
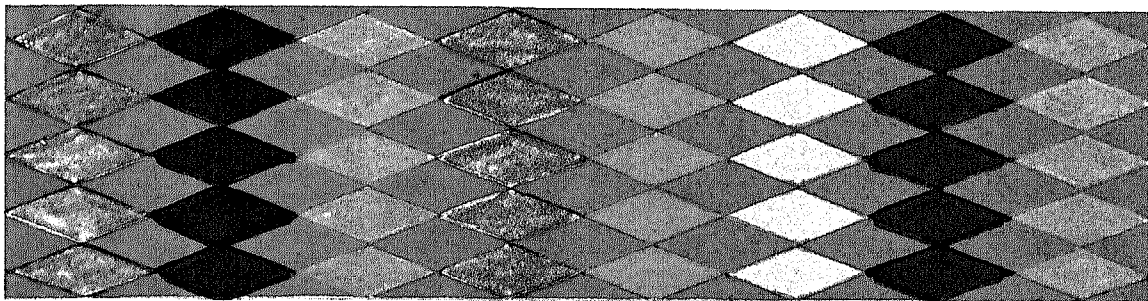


Plate 17. Coloured patterns found in a married woman's blouse. The shoulder pattern is called "Squares with big Sides".

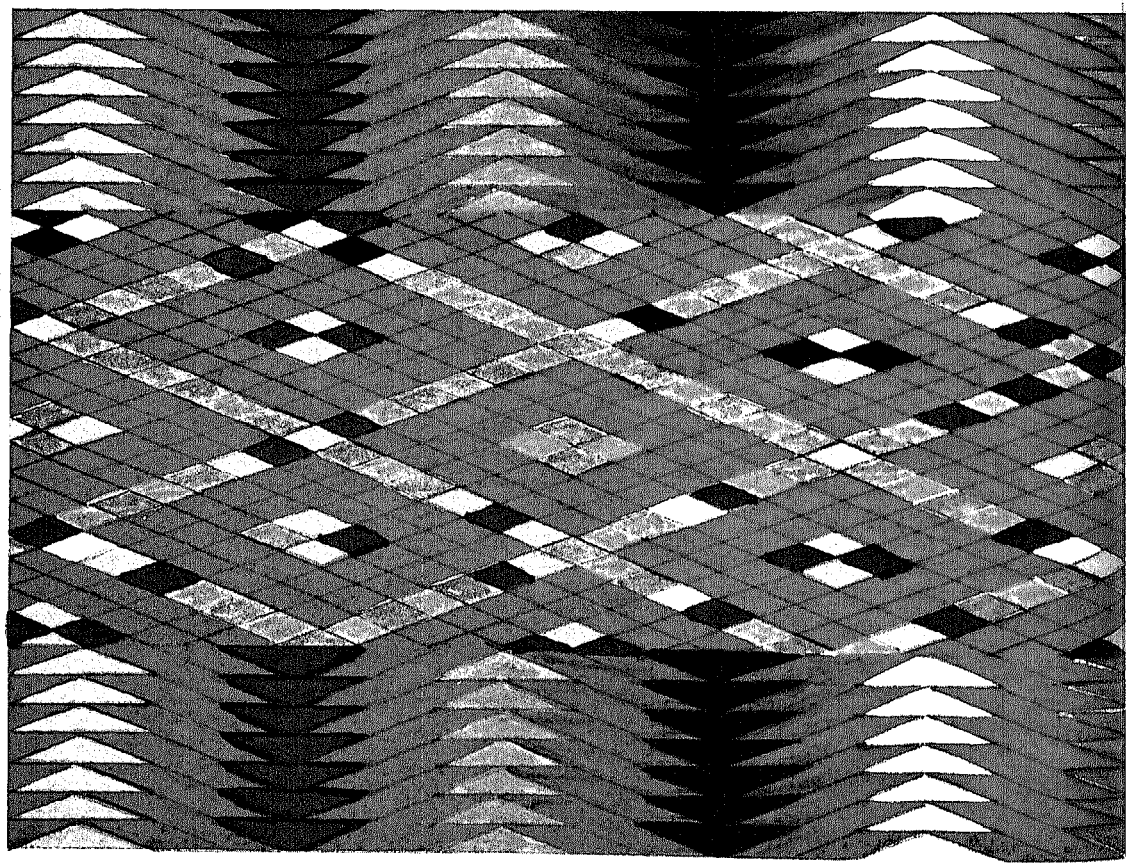


Plate 18. Coloured patterns found in a married woman's blouse. The shoulder pattern is called "Squares with big Sides".



Plate 19. Pwo Karen boy.

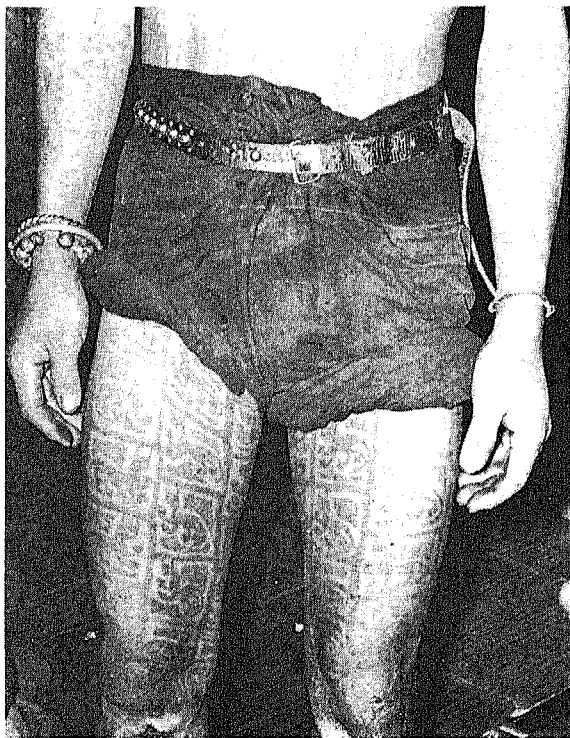


Plate 20. Decorative tattoos of Pwo Karen boy.



Plate 21. Old Pwo Karen man.



Plate 22. Ceremonial dresses of Pwo Karen girls.



Plate 23. Ceremonial dress of Pwo Karen boys.



Plate 24. Young Pwo Karen at a funeral.