

Karen “Natural Beauty”

Thai Hilltribesmen: Karen

The Karen immigrated to Thailand since over 200 years ago and is considered to be the largest hilltribe in Thailand. They can be divided into 4 sub-groups, namely Pwo, Sgaw, Taungsu, and Kayah. The two groups which continue to wear their traditional costumes and pass down well-preserved skills in producing handwoven fabrics are the Pwo or Red Karen and the Sgaw or White Karen.



The Karen are known for their peace-loving ways and their appreciation of nature. Karen ancestors believe that spirits protect their natural surroundings so man and nature must continue to rely on each other. This belief is reflected in the myriad of ceremonies to pay homage to nature, as well as the patterns that are handwoven into their fabrics.

Karen Handwoven Fabric

The Karen are known among the various hilltribes for their skill in weaving. All Karen girls are taught to weave by their mothers since the young age of 10. They start off by weaving small pieces of cloth that are 2 inches wide called Taepu and then graduate to weaving the long white dress worn by unmarried women called Chewa. Once they are considered skillful enough, they move on to more complex patterns. Karen women make their family's clothing and their own and also make apparel for important events like weddings and various ceremonies.

In the past, the Karen would grow cotton to use in their own household. These cotton would be spun into thread and then dyed before being woven using a waist loom. The waist loom limits the fabric to a narrow width, forcing the weaver to have to decide the purpose of the fabric, whether it is for a blouse, a sarong, or a bag, before she starts weaving.





The narrow width of the Karen handwoven fabric differentiates the Karen costume from other hilltribes. Two pieces of handwoven fabric are sewn together to make the Karen blouse with openings left for the neck and the arms so there is no need to cut into the fabric. The patterns in the front and back are identical, reflecting the Karen characteristic of honesty and straight forwardness, that is the back being the same as the front.

The Karen have excelled in preserving and passing down their weaving and embroidery skills to the younger generation. The Sgaw Karen place great importance in practicing the patterns created by their ancestors as they believe it brings auspiciousness to the family. Every year following the harvest season, the Sgaw Karen conduct a ceremony where they have elders of the village tie the hands of the younger generation with fabric that has ancient patterns on them. These fabric are well-kept for the auspiciousness of the household and are brought out only once a year for this hand-tying ceremony. The fabric are placed on a tray with a white piece of thread placed on top before the elders tie it around the wrists of the younger hilltribesmen.

Karen tradition says fabric for use in auspicious events, particularly an engagement, needs to be woven and completed in 1 day. If someone in the village dies, every household must pause their weaving as a gesture of mourning for the dead. If the weaver was in the middle of weaving fabric to be used for an auspicious event, such as a birth, an engagement, or a wedding, they cannot use that fabric for the event and must give it away as that piece of fabric is now considered tainted.



The Karen handwoven fabric comes in many types, such as blouses, chest cloth, job's tear embroidery, and sarong, and the Support Foundation encourages the weaving of all types of fabric by the Karen. The handwoven fabric and job's tear embroidery made by skillful Karen craftsmen have proven to be very popular as they can be incorporated into daily living. This has resulted in the Karen earning enough income for a better living.

Distinctive Characteristics of Patterns on Handwoven Fabric: Karen

The artwork on Karen handwoven fabric has distinct characteristics that are strongly unique to the tribe and are derived from the harmonious blending of a variety of factors.

Pattern creation – Due to the Karen's devotion, proximity, and respect for nature, Karen ancestors are often inspired by their natural surroundings, plants, flowers, trees, animals, things used in daily living, as well as traditions and culture to come up with patterns for their handwoven fabric.



Characteristics of pattern unique to the tribe – The artwork on the Karen's handwoven fabric features their simple lifestyle that focuses on unity, harmony, respect for ancestors, humility, and devotion to nature. The making of the pattern and the usage of muted colors, unlike other tribes' bold colors, showcase the tribe's simplistic yet enriched way of life. This makes the Karen handwoven fabric memorable for anyone who comes across one.

Despite the usage of ancient patterns on Karen handwoven fabric, the weaver may include her own interpretation of those patterns, inspired by her natural surroundings. Furthermore, the technique used may result in a different appearance for the same patterns. Some of the techniques used include using different colored threads for the weft and warp, twill and satin weaving, discontinuous supplementary weft, embroidery using colored threads or yarn, or job's tear decoration. These techniques allow Karen handwoven fabric to be developed for use in different ways.





Pattern creation technique – The Karen are very meticulous when it comes to weaving, with detailed steps for the whole process. Patterns are thought out in the first step of sorting out threads and rolling them onto a bamboo stick for the loom so the color and number of threads can be determined. This step is key to the beauty of the fabric because one misstep in counting the threads will lead to the pattern going wrong. With the waist loom, the consistency of the force used by the weaver is also important as it results in a smooth texture of the fabric. Careful sequencing of the threads and consistency in the use of force in the weaving process will produce orderly and clear patterns.

Job's tear embroidery, distinct to the tribe, also requires a carefully thought-out design of where to place the job's tear and where to skip, with the goal being straight rows of job's tear decorations on the fabric.

The current patterns seen on Karen handwoven fabric can be largely divided into ancient patterns that have been passed down through many generations and used by almost all sub-groups, such as the pumpkin seed pattern, spider web pattern, or eye pattern. The other patterns are those incorporating ancient patterns with more current additions by different generation of weavers in each locale. These patterns differ on the details added by the weaver.

The following patterns are only a part of the ancient patterns that have been passed down by Karen ancestors. These patterns are used by the Pwo and Sgaw Karen who are Support Hilltribesmen. The names of the patterns may be different according to the Karen dialect of the sub-group. In addition, some of the names do not have a Thai translation as they are ancient names for the patterns.

Distinct characteristics of patterns on handwoven fabric – Pwo Karen

Pakangdong Pattern (spider web)

Pakangdong is Pwo Karen for spider web and is used to call the ancient pattern created by Pwo Karen ancestors who were inspired by **the beauty of spider while weaving its web on trees**. The Pakangdong pattern comes in 2 different forms, the first one with single crosses and the Pakangdong Ngai Ju with double crosses on each other. The Pakangdong pattern remains popular on fabric used to make women's blouses, bags, and sarong.

Bie Kow Pattern (square)

Bie Kow is Pwo Karen and is used to call an ancient pattern that is used in twill and satin weaving and discontinuous supplementary weft. The Bie Kow pattern is **made of squares on top of each other** and is a basic pattern that all Pwo Karen women must learn before they can move on to more complex patterns.



Aphu Pattern (child)

Aphu is Pwo Karen for **child** and is used to call an ancient pattern of job's tear embroidery, passed down from ancestors. The name Aphu is derived from the **petite embroidery patterns like a small child in a family** and also from how this is the basic job's tear embroidery pattern that all Karen girls start out learning. The Aphu pattern looks like a 'V' in the English language and is used to embroider the edges of married Pwo Karen women's blouses.

Bai Klu Tachi Terng Ming Nung Pattern (vertical and horizontal)

Bai Klu Tachi Terng Ming Nung is Pwo Karen for the **pattern derived from warp and weft threads** and is the name of an ancient pattern of the Pwo Karen that has been passed down by their ancestors. The pattern is made up of 3 rows of 5 small horizontal squares interspersed with 3 rows of 5 small vertical squares to produce a finished pattern that looks like a spider web.

Kiew Mee Pattern (Konjac flower)

Kiew Mee is Pwo Karen for **Konjac flower** which is a plant that grows naturally in the forest. It is the name of a pattern used to decorate the edges of a blouse or a bag. The Konjac flower, which is often gathered from the forest for the edible stem, inspired this pattern among Pwo Karen ancestors. The Kiew Mee pattern is considered to be complex and detailed so any Pwo Karen woman who can sew this pattern is considered highly skilled.

Ta Jow Pattern (decoration on the edges)

Ta Jow is Pwo Karen for **decoration on the edges** and is used to call an ancient pattern that is used to decorate the edges of the main pattern for enhanced beauty. The Ta Jow pattern can come in many forms so to identify the pattern, you can simply call it Ta Jow, followed by the name of the pattern that you used to decorate the edges and end the main pattern. For example, Ta Jow Bie Kow is using the **Bie Kow** or the square pattern to decorate the edges while **Ta Jow Ang Koo Ka** is decorating the edges with a spiral pattern.

Chang Dai Chui Pattern (chicken wing)

Chang Dai Chui is Pwo Karen for **chicken wing**. Karen ancestors were inspired to create this pattern based on the movement of a chicken's wing. Karen households raise chicken for food and also use them as offerings for important events, such as ceremonies to pray to ancestors and blessing ceremonies. The **Chang Dai Chui pattern** is used to decorate Pwo Karen women's sarong.

Kuchu Pattern (hairpin)

Kuchu is Pwo Karen for **hairpin** and is used to call an ancient pattern passed down from ancestors that **resembles ancient hairpins made from bamboo and used by Pwo Karen women**. Pwo Karen women usually wear their hair up and use a bamboo hairpin to keep it in place. The Kuchu pattern is considered a complex and ancient pattern that is made using naturally-dyed cotton threads. Nowadays it is very rare to find a Pwo Karen who can produce this pattern but there are still weavers who are passing down the skill to their descendants to make sure this pattern does not disappear with time.



Neng Kai Pu Pattern (fabric used in engagement ceremonies)

Neng Kai Pu is Karen for fabric used in engagement ceremonies. In Pwo Karen engagement tradition, the groom must bring handwoven sarong with the Neng Kai Pu pattern as gifts for female elders of the bride. The Neng Kai Pu pattern uses the technique of tie-dye so that a white line appears in the center of the fabric. If the fabric lacks this white line, it cannot be used in the engagement ceremony and the ceremony will not proceed. Therefore, every Karen woman who has a son must learn the Neng Kai Pu pattern.

Kai Kong Pattern (curve)

Kai Kong is Pwo Karen which means curving back and forth. The Kai Kong pattern originated from ancient times by the Pwo Karen and the name is derived from the different colored threads curving back and forth. This pattern is commonly used for the wedding dress of Karen women, who switch from wearing a long dress to a blouse and skirt on their wedding day.

Lung Kae Kling Pattern (pumpkin seed)

Lung Kae Kling is Pwo Karen for pumpkin seed. Karen ancestors were inspired by pumpkin seeds in creating this pattern as pumpkins are a major staple grown by almost all Karen households. The Lung Kae Kling pattern, passed down for hundreds of years now, is most popular among the Pwo Karen, who use the pattern for both men and women's apparel, including women's sarong used in daily life, as well as sarong for important events like a wedding.

Distinct characteristics of patterns on handwoven fabric – Sgaw Karen

Se Kle Pattern (continuous line)

Se Kle is Sgaw Karen for a continuous line as the pattern is the weaving of a continuous line. This is an ancient pattern passed down among Sgaw Karen women and is quite simple to make. It often adorns the tunics of Sgaw Karen men.

Per Doh Pattern (python)

Per Doh is Sgaw Karen for python and is used to call an ancient job's tear embroidery pattern that has been passed down by ancestors. The Per Doh pattern resembles a flower with 4 petals that is placed throughout a square fabric and is inspired by the circular pattern on the skin of a python. It is often sewn onto married Karen women's blouses.

Tar Ming Kli Pattern (eye)

Tar Ming Kli is Karen for the pattern that looks like a human eye and is the name used by the Sgaw Karen while the Pwo Karen call this pattern Tamise, which also means eye.

The Tar Ming Kli is an ancient pattern, passed down through generations. It is most commonly used for turban cloths so much so that it has become a distinct characteristic that the Sgaw Karen's turban cloths must have the Tar Ming Kli pattern, or else, that piece

of cloth would not be considered a turban cloth. The pattern has an underlying meaning that the wearer would have the **eye, which will help them find their way in life.**



Ta Ko Lae Pattern (attraction)

Ta Ko Lae is Sgaw Karen for attraction. Sgaw Karen ancestors are inspired to create this pattern by an arrow moving forward and slicing through the air like the attraction of the pattern which is a continuous action forward. This ancient pattern is seen on all Sgaw Karen's turban cloths. They believe the Ta Ko Lae pattern will bring good luck to the wearer because it symbolizes the **continuation of a smooth life.**

Chui Kor Lor Pattern (dog's paw)

Chui Kor Lor is Sgaw Karen for dog's paw and is an ancient pattern that utilizes the embroidery of cotton threads or yarn. The pattern starts by dividing the fabric up into 4, using a cross pattern. Then, each area will be embroidered with a pattern that looks like a cluster of leaves. Sgaw Karen ancestors are inspired to create this pattern on their apparel by dogs' paw prints on the ground.

Ta Sor Tor Pattern

Ta Sor Tor comes from the Sgaw Karen language and is the name used to call the pattern derived from the **Karen-style twill and satin weaving (waist loom)**. The pattern resembles a 6-petaled flower with 2 large petals that look like a heart and 4 smaller symmetrical petals which look like smaller hearts. The Ta Sor Tor is an ancient pattern mostly used for men's tunics to wear during important events such as a wedding.



Ta Sue Rong (double line)

Ta Sue Rong is Sgaw Karen for **double line** and is used to call an ancient pattern passed down by ancestors. The pattern is made up of a continuous double white line in the center and along the edges of the tunics men wear for their weddings. The Sgaw Karen believes the Ta Sue Rong pattern depicts a married couple who needs to be by each other's side and take care of each other forever, and this is why the pattern has been passed down through generations.

Ber Ka Kor Pattern (tadpole's mouth)

Ber Ka Kor is a term in the Sgaw Karen language and is used to call an ancient pattern which utilizes weaving and discontinuous supplementary weft. The Karen ancestors are inspired to come up with this pattern by the shape of a **tadpole's mouth**. Tadpoles often stay in clusters which resemble the Karen lifestyle that fosters harmony, unity, and compassion, therefore wearing this pattern is believed to bring valuable friendships.

Tue Di (ants' eggs)

Tue Di is Sgaw Karen for ants' eggs and is the name of an ancient job's tear embroidery pattern that has been passed down by ancestors. The Sgaw Karen believe that embroidering this pattern on their blouses will bring good luck to the wearer because ants' eggs are clustered, thus symbolizing unity and harmony which the Karen prize.

Sa Kor Por Pattern (eggplant flower)

Sa Kor Por is the name of an ancient pattern by the Sgaw Karen which is created by stitching cotton or wool threads into a design that looks like 8 branches of colorful flowers. Sa Kor Por means **eggplant flower**, which was the inspiration behind the design as eggplants are a common vegetable. The Karen believe the eggplant flower has an auspicious meaning of belonging to a group as they place a great importance on living in harmony and unity. The Sa Kor Por pattern is most often stitched on a bride's wedding dress as a blessing for the bride and groom to love each other, not argue or separate, and to live with each other until old age.

Ta Kae Kor Pattern (uneven path)

The Ta Kae Kor pattern comes from the Sgaw Karen and is used to call an ancient pattern of job's tear embroidery work. For this pattern, job's tears are embroidered vertically, up and down, like waves, and the name Ta Kae Kor means uneven path. The embroidery pattern is commonly used to decorate the edge of a woman's wedding gown as a reminder for the couple to stay by each other's side throughout their lives, no matter how uneven the road they find themselves on.

Niki – Nimae – Nitoh

Niki – Nimae – Nitoh are the 3 patterns found on all Sgaw Karen women's sarong since ancient times until today. **Niki** is the main pattern of the sarong that is made from dying the cotton threads. **Nimae** adorns the edges of both sides of the sarong and is made using black or dark blue threads while **Nitoh** is the pattern made using colorful threads all throughout the sarong and mostly grouped at the edge of the sarong. It has been said that a sarong which lacks any of these patterns does not follow Sgaw Karen traditions and the wearer is someone who disregards the culture of the tribe.