

TAIS

TIMOR LESTE



TRADITIONAL WEAVINGS OF TIMOR LESTE TAIS

Tais are traditional woven clothing and costume of Timor Leste in the Tetum language. They are solely women's work at every stage of the production. In Fataluku, tais are known as lau and as maletan in the Mambai language of the highlands.

Tais have been an important item of exchange for the community in Timor Leste and they are still used as part of the bride price today for many families. From traditional ceremonies such as weddings, engagements and funerals to present day office and government's official functions of the state where they are worn and also given as gifts.



A private collection of lau from a family in Lospalos. These are worn and displayed only for special occasions.

A lau being woven into fine intricate designs. Traditional plant based black dye is used here.



Elaborate designs are woven into tais depending on the district of origin of the weavers, her skills and her family tradition. The patterns can range from traditional imagery and symbolic patterns to present day symbols and message. The designs and types of tais vary from district and place in Timor Leste.

Most of the tais are bright and colourful textiles except for the almost 'extinct' rapihili made by the remote hill village of Macadade on Atauro island. Rapihili is natural and plain with no dyed threads. It is woven by using thin fibrous threads of a plant.

Two pieces of tais woven by the women from Maubara



In Maubisse however it is taboo to produce maletan even if the weaver is from another place. According to locals, there was an agreement made a long time ago that people from Maubisse could only buy or barter for tais from the people in Atsabe and Ermera. Women living in Maubisse have been warned that if they try to weave maletan, they will meet with a tragic end.

Traditional tais were produced in two main styles, mane for male and feto for female. The mane tais are a large open piece of fabric wrapped around like a sarong around the man's waist.

The feto tais have the two opposite ends of the fabric sewn together to form a cylindrical tube. The woman steps into the tube and fastens at the waist to keep the tais in like a narrow maxi-skirt. In addition tais are woven into varying sizes of shoulder shawls known as selendang in Tetum for men as well as women.



A fully costumed dance troupe fully attired in tais and selendang



Many other items using tais are now available to meet a wide range of demands and used. The most common item is probably the selendang which is given away as small gifts by everyone.

A SYMBOL OF INDEPENDENT TIMOR LESTE

Tais have become an important item of the Timorese culture which represents the identity and culture of the independent nation. Leaders and citizens alike were unanimous in their embrace of this traditional handmade fabric.

Today tais are even more widely used than before in Timor Leste. They are now a must-have item for all visitors to the country. Government uses tais as diplomatic gift to visiting guests and in all official functions. Tais has more applications than ever. New and creative ideas in using tais or their designs and motifs continue to surface from time to time. Tais have well and truly become a recognised and widely used cultural item in this country. Economically it makes sense as the rising importance of tais will help women earn a reliable and stable income from a craft they have done well for a long time.



Archival images from October 1999 showing tais being worn by key leaders of the resistance and Timorese alike to celebrate their hard fought freedom and independence



Former President Jose Ramos Horta presents farewell gifts to the UNHCR James Lynch



Former Timor-Leste Foreign Minister Zacarias Albano da Costa present gifts to the Prime Minister of Thailand Yingluck Sinawatra



THE MAKING OF TAIS

The designs and colours used in tais weaving are linked with respective districts. They are quite unique for the different regions, linguistic groups and their living and natural environment. Each piece of tais and the art of production carry the long history that has been passed down through women. Changes in their surroundings, socio-cultural and political environment are 'recorded' through tais by women.

Women in Timor Leste are proud of their tais weaving skills. They painstakingly and diligently worked through each step and patiently weaved to get the piece of fabric they have aimed for. While some women buy commercially available coloured threads from local markets, many still make their own. They plant cotton bushes near their house and food garden. When the cotton bushes produce snow white flowers known in Tetum as kabas each flower is gently picked from the stem.

The white soft flower or cotton ball is separated from the pod and seeds buried within the flower are painstakingly removed with a simple homemade tool.



Removing seeds from the cotton balls



Simple implements used in the thread making process.



The cotton is then hand spun and wound into balls prior to dyeing or weaving.

Traditionally, dyes are made locally using bark of plants and other parts of specific plants which give colour to the cotton. Clay or ochre and even mud have been used to dye the cotton thread. The dyed threads are then dried before use.

Dyed cotton threads drying in the sun on bamboo stand





Many women buy commercial coloured cotton thread for the weaving and this adds brightness to the colours and they can access a wider range of coloured threads than relying solely on their natural environment for raw materials. Their customary weaving skills remained strong since they continue to use traditional weaving machine to create designs to produce intricate patterns using the colours of their choice.

A piece of tais can easily take up several months to complete, depending on the amount of time available to the weaver.



THE TAIS MARKET



The Dili tais market is an excellent place to shop. There is a wide range of Timorese woven fabric from all of the districts that produce tais. You can find an assortment of fabrics and newer products made from tais and a whole range of other 'antique' items and souvenirs.



Rua Gov. Celestino da Silva, Farol,
Díli POBOX 390
Timor-Leste

Email: kop.natureza@gmail.com



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