In chapter 1, phrases linking our mutual interconnectedness to cloth—our “interwoven lives,” for example, or the “fabric of human relationships”—are listed. This chapter delves more deeply into the ways that textiles are involved in this “social fabric.” It begins with a look at how textiles tie us together in our most intimate relationships, both in terms of emotional connections and sexuality. The discussion moves on to community on a broader scale, focusing on topics such as bonding through group-identified dress, shared textile-making, and textiles involved with leisure and play. The chapter ends with a look at the ways in which cloth can further cohesion in very broad groups, exemplified in stories about the sometimes surprising power of flags, and the many charitable efforts that involve textile sharing.

**Family ties**

As the previous chapters have intimated, many of our experiences with cloth take place in a social context. Textiles bond us to our families in varying ways. Sometimes, they “tie” individuals to the spirit of their ancestors. The Tuvan reindeer herders of Mongolia make this very literal; they use “magic” knots in their spiritual practices in order to keep themselves connected with ancestral energies. The Navajo made ties on their looms for the same purpose, and the Toraja of Sulawesi, Indonesia weaved ceremonial garments featuring patterns believed to connect wearers with both the living and those who had gone before. The textile connection with ancestors may be metaphorical, as in Ladakh, where the phrase “to be warp and weft” can be loosely translated as knowing one’s lineage or place in the family (parental descent is known as “the warp,” and the children are the weft). The English phrase “cut from the same cloth” is often also used in relation to family heritage.
Families anticipating the birth of a child expend energy on amassing the appropriate baby textiles; they must lay in a supply of blankets, diapers, and clothing for a growing infant. The preparation process was particularly demanding in the era before mass production, as the recommendations in the 1838 manual *The Workwoman’s Guide* make clear. Susan Hathorn, a sailing captain’s wife who kept a diary of her daily activities in 1835, conformed fairly closely to these guidelines. Working almost daily, she started sewing in June for a baby born December 1. In today’s world, where necessities like diapers are readily available, relatives (especially grandmothers) often make one-of-a-kind blankets or quilts. Among native Hawaiians, these coverings are subsequently viewed as family treasures that hold the spirit and love of the maker. Junedale Lauaeomakana Quinories remembers her mother grabbing the family quilt for this reason whenever there was a tidal alert; they, like the children, had to be taken to safety on higher ground.4

Mothers in Chinese minority cultures put inordinate attention on cloth carriers for their infants. As Yujiao Liu explained:

Why would someone take so much time and put so much into the aesthetic design of a baby carrier, something that would wear away with frequent use, something that a baby would outgrow quickly?... Chinese minority [people do this] because they feel that the carrier is a physical symbol of the tie between mother and child. Most mothers are reluctant to give up their carriers to buyers and collectors. Under circumstances where they have to sell [them], most insist on cutting off the carrier ties to keep for themselves... I could not help but imagine that...these baby carrier ties might be the replacement for the umbilical cords we cut when our babies are born.5

---

**A BABY’S LAYETTE**

- 12-18 shirts
- 4-6 dozen napkins (diapers)
- 4-6 baby gowns
- 4-6 dresses
- 2-3 flannel shawls
- 1 cloak or pelisse
- 2-4 flannel bands
- 5-6 day caps
- 3-4 night flannels
- 4-8 socks
- 4-6 petticoats
- 4-8 socks
- 2-3 flannel caps
- 6-12 pinafores
- 3-4 day flannels
- 1-2 flannel cloak
- 1 hood

From *The Workwoman’s Guide*, 1838

---

*below left*: Detail of exceedingly fine tuck embroidery worked into a Miao baby carrier from Guizhou Province, China, 1950-60.

*below right*: Bai baby carrier, Dai, Yunnan Province, China, 2003.
The story of the Hawaiian baby quilt reminds us that textiles often serve as family heirlooms. Cloth is portable and easily stored, so it is a possession likely to be passed down, especially because it seems to hold ancestors’ energy. Sheldon Oberman tells of finding his grandfather’s tallit (prayer shawl) many years after he had stored it away in a drawer when he was a teenager:

In my late thirties, preparing for my own son’s bar mitzvah [sic], I came across [it], still in the drawer, still waiting for me. As I held it, I smelled a faint trace of [my grandfather’s] shaving soap. Then came a rush of memories—his whiskery face; his gentle voice; the softness of his shawl against my cheek when I would lean against him. I could see the way he wrapped the [fringe] around his fingers... I remember the way he would rise and rock back and forth in prayer and how the prayer shawl swayed with him, as if it might open and spread out like great white wings.6

Sometimes heirlooms are purposely created: textiles are made with the intention that they will become something important in a given family. Elisa Wachs asked fifty of her family members to contribute some personal item that could be sewn on the canopy she was making for her son’s wedding. When asked to give a “piece of themselves,” they provided objects like keys, gloves, and scarves. She also worked in items from the groom’s childhood, and even pieces of the cantor’s hat. That chuppah thus became a kind of family album, one with the potential to become even more meaningful over time, since it could be reused in future weddings. It was such a powerful object that others wanted similar albums for their own families, and Wachs found herself making personalized canopies for friends, even for couples who were not Jewish.7

Family memories are frequently embodied in textiles made with scraps of everyday fabric. In the Siddi communities of India (the Siddis are a minority people, part of the African diaspora, who live south of Goa), women piece quilts from old sari scraps. Koreans sometimes make pojagi (wrapping clothes used to cover documents and sentimental items) from leftover fabric. In both cases, family members are reminded of those who had worn or used the textile.8

American scrap quilt traditions are rightfully world-renowned. Understandably, scrap quilts flourished where people were poor. This was true for the African-Americans of Gee’s Bend and other southern coastal communities who stitched old overalls and leftovers from local clothing factories into bold abstract designs (their work has recently taken the worldwide art community by storm). It was true for many Native American groups who first embraced quilting in the 19th century. Mohawk quilter Doris Benedict reminisced:

In Jews Praying, 1875. Eliza Efimovitch Babin depicts a Russian man in a tallit (a traditionally patterned prayer shawl). Wearers sometimes bring the shawl up over the head, thus enclosing them in a private tent-like “house of prayer.”

**TO WORK WITH LOVE**

And what is it to work with love? It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.

Kahlil Gibran
I remember as a child lying on the bed and sitting there looking at the big squares that my mom made out of my dad’s coat or my grandfather’s coat. It got to be a challenge to say, “That was Grandpa’s and this was Mom’s and that was Dad’s,” just from going through the patchwork as you lay there in the evening remembering who wore what and then what it looked like on them...it gave you a sense of warmth and closeness to other members of your family.9

Victorian “crazy” quilts incorporated fabric novelties that came from garments—pieces of dress silks, neckties, even hair ribbons. Some made great use of the silk badges that were then ubiquitous (they were printed for events ranging from fraternal meetings to Sunday School conventions to holiday parties). The badges were saved as personal mementos, and when put together into a quilt, they too functioned as family scrapbooks. The maker of one such quilt, now held in the Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, remains unidentified, but we can follow her family story through the badges. Family members were apparently heavily involved in fraternal organizations, local politics, and the Methodist church. They traveled extensively through the region.10

The relatively new “passage quilt” is purposefully constructed from clothing left behind by a recently deceased loved one. These memorials contain everything from bath robes to evening gowns and golf shirts. They are made to help mourners get through their bereavement.11

When family members are far away and want to send a “piece” of themselves back home, they often choose a textile. It is lightweight and thus easy to carry or ship, but, again, the associative power of the cloth is more important than its practicality. Soldiers fighting in World Wars I and II often sent handkerchiefs or pillow covers to their wives or mothers because they could anticipate those items in use; a handkerchief sent to

Handwoven Peruvian belt made of alpaca fiber with the owner’s name (Basilio Ticora Pari) and date (otto de 1969) inscribed in a demanding pick-up weaving technique.
a lover might, for example, be worn close to her body. The cloth was a
stand-in, an embodiment of the relationship between the individuals.
The impetus for deployed soldiers to send souvenirs, handkerchiefs was
so strong that businesses sprung up to supply them. During World War I,
the French provided Allied troops with textiles marked with statements
such as “Souvenir of the Great War,” or “Souvenir de France.” Other cloths
included phrases such as “To My Dear Sweetheart.”

Love, sex, and friendship
Small textile gifts play many roles in furthering intimacy. Handkerchiefs
were long used as love tokens or betrothal gifts. In the 16th century,
when the Countess of Champagne indicated the gifts that ladies might
properly accept from their suitors, she placed handkerchiefs at the top
of the list. Even as recently as the early 20th century, it was customary
for a Sicilian bride to send the marriage contract to her groom wrapped
in a handkerchief. Among the Msinga, a Zulu people of southern Africa,
it is traditional for lovers to give one another small decorative pieces
of beadwork with personal messages woven in. The messages are not
formed through actual words (in fact, some of the weavers may not be
literate), but are embedded in the contextual interpretation of bead size,
color, material, and placement. These “love letters” are typically worn
as pendants, and if a man is seen with many around his neck, he is known
to have many sweethearts.

Intimacy also extends to friendship. Women who wanted to express
their mutual regard in 19th-century Europe and America sometimes
gave one another novelty handkerchiefs as well, or in the period when
sewing was an everyday part of their lives, they offered handmade sewing
accessories. Early in the century, friends sometimes gave maternity
“pin pillows” to a mother-to-be. They inserted pins in attractive patterns,
speckling out messages such as “Welcome Little Stranger” (in this pre-
industrial period, pins were quite valuable, so the gift was practical as well
as appealing). In 1823, Eliza Green received another sewing-related present,
a needle keep, as a wedding present from her closest childhood friend.
Green attached a note to the small case (it looked much like the comfort
bags discussed in chapter 3), stating that she “valued it above rubies.”
Needlework and household tools were packaged in highly amusing forms
in later decades; “trifles” such as the “Little Companion” featured in Peterson’s
magazine in January 1865 were often exchanged as gifts. “There cannot
be a more appropriate or gratifying souvenir of affection [than a novelty
sewing case],” noted Ornamental Toys and How to Make Them in 1870.

Many of our most intimate relationships, of course, have a sexual
component. The sexual symbolism of thread or string and some of the
wedding customs that linked cloth with fecundity and sexuality have
already been referenced. Red thread is equated with blood and the life force
and, by extension, with human passion. Red threads appear in interesting
ways in Buddhist contexts. A koan written by Chinese monk Sung-Yuan

{opposite, above} Detail of an American pieced “crazy” quilt with silk souvenirs
badges, c. 1910.

{opposite, below} Detail of a crazy quilt square pieced together with rainbow-like
ribbons.
[below] This outfit worn during a Caribbean carnival parade clearly plays up the sexuality of its wearer.

[above, right] Kashryn B. Garry made this string skirt (apron), copying a prototype that is still found in vestigial form in some parts of the Balkans. The long tassels would cover a woman's pelvic area, and allude to fertility. The earliest evidence of these garments is on a Bronze Age archaeological site in Denmark, dating to the 14th century BCE.

asks, “Why is it that even the most clear-eyed monk cannot sever the red thread of passion between his legs?” The image was literalized in early China, where courtesans wore red garters on their thighs. Rinzu Zen practitioners tie a red thread around a bride's wrist as a sign of a fruitful union and a frank acknowledgment of its sexuality. Red Thread Zen, a school started in Japan by the 14th-century master Ikkyu, went so far as to approach sexuality in a ritual manner, akin to Tantric Buddhism.\(^5\) Even by itself, the color red stands for fertility, to the point that in many parts of the world a woman who has reached menopause is expected to forego the color and wear only somber hues.

When the color red is incorporated into fringes that sway on a woman's skirt (apron), it draws particular attention to the genital area. Elizabeth Barber argues that the string skirts found in Eastern European bridal clothing as recently as the 20th century are a continuation of a 25,000-year-old tradition. Patricia Anawalt claims the tradition can be traced all the way from the Paleolithic era to the present day.\(^6\) Tassels and fringes hold the quality of sexual promise, even today, Amazigh brides are dressed in belts with hanging tassels, and Hopi brides carry sashes with long fringes that move gracefully and allude to life-giving rain (fecundity). Examples of sexual strings can be seen in contemporary Western culture as well: G-strings worn by exotic dancers, for example, and the tasseled “pasties” that might swing from their nipples.

The netted veils attached to women's hats in the mid-20th century also relate to string and sexual allure. These nets did not really hide the
face, but cast over it a sense of mystery and drama. They were in essence like see-through lingerie, displaced to an area of the body that was not off-limits. These were related to the transparent veil of the Western bride, which was itself a modification of the ancient tradition of veiling the face with an opaque covering. In many cultures, the bride’s face is not revealed to the groom until the wedding is complete, when she is available to him sexually.

I have talked about engagement rituals in which textile tools are involved in wedding negotiations. In fact, spinning activities were often part of the extended courtship process, and they carried overt sexual associations. (This makes sense when we think of the primal associations between creating thread and creating life.) Among the Dai of southwest China, a spinning-related courtship practice took place during the agricultural slack season. In the evening, young women would sit around a large bonfire just outside the village, quietly turning their spinning wheels. Groups of young men draped in red blankets would approach, playing guitars or other musical instruments as they walked around the circle. If one of them was interested in a particular woman, he would come up to her, and if the interest was reciprocated, she would take out a small stool from under her long skirt and invite him to sit down. When he did, he would draw his blanket around them both so they could talk privately. In pre-industrial Hungary, unmarried girls often spun together as they waited for boys to come and court. Legend has it that if a girl dropped her spindle while the boys were there, one of them would ask to kiss her. In Germany, the communal spinning house (also called a flax barn) expressly functioned as a courtship site on winter evenings. Boys would come to join the girls, “cheer[ing] the spinners with song and recitations.” (This reminds us that “spinsters” was originally only a descriptive term, not a reference to an “old maid.”) The German boys might escort the girls home, carrying their distaffs and spindles. 17

In industrial-era America, too, the spinning wheel—or at least the young spinner—stood as a symbol of romance (implicit sexuality). Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1839 poem, The Courtship of Miles Standish, was well loved from the time of its release, but its heroine, Patricia Mullins, became a particularly important icon of the Colonial Revival movement several decades later. (It was only well after the Industrial Revolution that spinning became associated in the West with the leisure class and was regarded as a pretty or picturesque pastime.) Longfellow’s portrayal of Mullins as the “May Flower of Plymouth,” a virtuous, thrifty, sweet, and docile woman who sang psalms while working at her wheel, completely captured the popular imagination. When she “[fed] the ravenous spindle,” according to Longfellow, she sent “electric thrills” through the body of her suitor, John Alden. It was the imagined quality of docility and calmness that resonated with Colonial Revival audiences, but Mullins’s spinning was what gave her power. The thread she was spinning was likened to Alden’s life and fortune. 18
Creating community

Textiles also play a significant role in bringing groups of people together; they concretize group relationships. In the Himalayan region, fabric gifts are routinely exchanged on all social occasions, rather than flowers are in Western culture. The Bhutanese offer cloths when they are greeting or parting from friends, or celebrating events such as promotions. In Ladakh, according to Monisha Ahmed, a skilled weaver must know how to distribute her textiles so as to “tie her into the widest possible web of social relations,” since her role is to help bind together the people of the community. In Nagaland in northwest India, traditional cloths are now exchanged between delegations of Christian communities. The Naga were formerly known for their headhunting practices, and the cloths serve as a way of cementing relationships among once-warring sub-groups. In Tibet, a white scarf or kata is given as an offering of good will to teachers, government officials, or religious leaders. Katas are also exchanged among peers; they lend a positive note to the beginning of any enterprise or relationship. In July 2006, on the occasion of the inaugural run of the train that connects China with Tibet, each passenger arriving in Lhasa was greeted by a Tibetan woman who placed one of these traditional textiles around his or her neck. (The passengers were also greeted with Chinese flags, dramatically indicating how the train was drawing Tibet further into the Chinese orbit.) Another poignant kata story comes from a doctor who performed an unsuccessful cataract surgery in Tibet under the aegis of the Seva service agency in 2005. He explains that his patient, who had lost an eye, nevertheless offered him a kata after the operation. The patient appreciated the expended effort and the fact that many others had their sight restored. To the doctor, the cloth now serves as a “reminder to strive for continuous improvement.”
Groups offer textile gifts as expressions of communal esteem and affection. In 19th-century America, members of a particular church sometimes got together to make a “friendship” quilt for a departing minister, or for an individual who was leaving to homestead in the West. In other communities, “signature quilts” both represent and bond communities by featuring names of participating members. These could function at times almost as a local archive, and indeed have been used to track given church congregations or similar groups. Group solidarity was multiplied when, as was often the case, the finished textile was raffled off to raise money for the organization or its cause. Contemporary Native Americans use handmade quilts to bestow honor in a community context. High school graduates and star basketball players from northern Plains communities often receive a quilt (it functions as a robe that can be draped around the body) for their accomplishment, and honor quilts of this kind are given away in large numbers at funerals and other rites of passage.11

Henry Glassie describes a different kind of community bonding when he writes in Turkish Traditional Art Today (1992) of floor carpets in Anatolian mosques. The front or main section of these buildings is covered with uniform, commercially made textiles that “unify the floor, uniting the congregation that prays as one on Fridays.” There is another level of meaning in the more intimate areas of the mosque, however, as locally made rugs cover the back of the floor and the balcony where women pray. The majority of these are woven in commemoration of a deceased loved one, whose name and village is inscribed in the border. They are conceived

[below, left] Pieced star quilt made by Rose Jean Walking Eagle to honor a basketball player in her community, Brockton, Montana, U.S., 1999. (A basketball is featured in the lower right corner.)

as pious donations to the mosque, and serve as a communal form of remembrance. To pray upon these textiles, Glassie says, “is to unify with the living congregation and with the congregation beyond.”

Some indigenous communities in Peru own and are responsible for a set of knotted strings or cords, khipu, which were made by their ancestors and passed on to successive generations in the same village. The khipu originally functioned as a thread-based record made by and about the town (see chapter 5 for a more detailed description). In the community of Tupicocha, they are lovingly maintained and ceremonially taken out at regular intervals. They are seen as the treasure—the “patrimony”—of the town; according to anthropologist Frank Salomon, they perpetuate age-old kinship relationships and village organization. A resident of Rapaz, another community that maintains an ancient khipu, says, “I feel my ancestors are talking to me when I look at [it].”

Cloth imprinted with distinctive designs, or particular combinations or types of garments, may be used the world over semiotically to mark group identity. Many books have been written about European folk dress, for example, illustrating the distinctive styles worn in specific villages or geographical regions. These evolved differently because the villages were once relatively isolated, and individuals who lived in close proximity learned from and influenced one another. Over time, particular styles became ingrained in the community’s sense of itself, to the point that when they were no longer used on a daily basis, these textiles became heritage markers for succeeding generations. The same phenomenon is evident in what are usually referred to as “ethnic” dress traditions. There were identifiable embroidery styles for each Palestinian village before World War II, for example; Bethlehem was known for its elaborate couching stitches, while Ramallah was characterized by trunk-shaped cross stitch. The Miao are so specific in their village designs that there is a saying that “if there are a hundred Miaso, there are a hundred different types of
[left] Detail of a woven huipil from Cobán, Guatemala, 1930s. Gauzy white huipiles of this type are unique to the northern highlands (Alta Verapaz) and represent masterful backstrap weaving.

[below, left] The embroidery patterns on these Yao trousers show group identity and are quite distinctive. Thailand, 1986.

costume.” Sometimes it is clan or ethnicity that is expressed, more than physical location. In Southeast Asia, Hmong clothing varied by clan affiliation—the Blue (sometimes translated as Green) Hmong were those who wore indigo-dyed skirts; the Redhead Hmong sported red pompons on their hats.

The close association between garment pattern and community identity even became a problem for the indigenous Guatemalan people during the extreme political unrest of the 1980s. In order to prevent reform groups (cooperatives, leftists, etc.) from coming to power, the army began a counterinsurgency program to overcome so-called “communists.” (The term was used to refer to almost anyone they wanted to contain, and the indigenous population became the primary target.) Because traditional dress (traje) had functioned almost like a heraldic banner that showed the local community the wearer came from, it became dangerous for individuals to appear in it in public; one might say they would essentially be “waving a red flag.” “We have stopped wearing [traje] so they will not take us, so they will not kidnap and torture us,” stated one refugee. Under less extreme conditions, the patterns had signified a sense of belonging and community pride.

Distinctive dress also signals a sense of belonging to religious groups; sartorial symbols such as the nun’s habit, monk’s robe, and Sikh’s turban abound worldwide. (While this book is primarily about textiles rather than forms of dress, it is in fact often the cloth that immediately stands out in these situations.) Individuals in separatist communities such as Hasidic Jews or Mennonites are also immediately recognized by their clothing, which is typically of a distinctive color as well as style. Although the dress signals distinctions such as marital status and religiosity to insiders who understand the subtle codes, outsiders typically see the believers as all dressing alike. They too are wearing red flags about their difference, to the point that their behavior is inevitably affected. A Hasidic Jew explained that their recognizable clothes cause them to function as “ambassadors” for their religion when they are in the outside world, and therefore they must always act properly in public. The garments constantly keep them tied to their community.

Uniforms—outfits made of identical cloth—are given to soldiers to help shift their loyalty to the group or to schoolchildren to homogenize difference. Unifying textiles also foster a sense of belonging in groups that represent a more temporary or partial part of one’s identity. We all know about the phenomenon of “team colors,” anyone who has gone to a football game and stood in the crowd of loyal fans creating a “sea” of red (or blue, or gold, etc.) cannot help being “pumped up” by the sense of solidarity. Uniform outfits can also help define one-time special occasions. The Yoruba of Nigeria celebrate weddings and commemorative events in garments made out of the same cloth (aso ebi)—cloth that has been specially printed for that purpose. Because everyone in attendance looks alike, the cohesion of the group is underlined (and because participants had to purchase
the cloth and have it made into garments, the honoree is shown a very high level of respect). In the West, printed T-shirts have come to express a similar kind of belonging at one-time events. The investment is not as great as with aso oke, but when individuals put on a shirt proclaiming their participation in a family reunion or fundraising marathon, they are still expressing identification with a distinguishable group. Unifying cloth also identifies and connects individuals participating in more contentious activities, such as protest marches and demonstrations. The crowds of people wearing green to protest the apparently fraudulent elections in Iran in 2009 represent one recent example on the world stage.


[above] Football fans wear red to cheer on the University of Wisconsin “Badgers.” This shot taken in 2006 captures the overwhelmingly feeling one gets seeing a vast crowd of sports enthusiasts wearing “team colors.”
Sharing work, forging bonds

The act of preparing a textile such as a friendship quilt is also an important way of furthering a sense of group cohesion. People bond easily with one another when they are engaged in shared work. Because textile production took so much of people’s time in the pre-industrial period, this kind of experience was a significant part of daily life throughout the world. Elizabeth Barber found evidence that women in the Neolithic and early Bronze Ages worked together on textile tasks; building remains in early Europe indicate that there were inner courtyards where women and children spent their days spinning and preparing flax. Groups of women working together are also represented in classical Greek art, and large numbers of loom weights have been found in the women’s sections of ancient Greek buildings, indicating that many women (probably slaves as well as wealthier householders) gathered there to spin and weave. The workplaces became community gathering spots, and as noted above, some evolved into courship sites. There is also evidence in archaeological cloth remains from diverse areas of the world indicating that many different hands probably worked together on a single weaving. Here again, we can intuit that the proximity of shared work fostered socialization and fellowship.7

We can point to many more recent examples of shared fiber work that bond communities together. Where textile tools are portable, women from a given town will often carry their equipment to a central location or to a friend’s home so they can work together. They talk while they are working, and their children play together. Among the Yurok basket makers in northern California, according to Lila O’Neale:

There was a sociable old custom of taking one’s materials to the creek. Some women always worked with the same friend; others went every day to join any group of four or five. Working in the cool shade where supplies could be kept damp facilitated pattern sharing as well as camaraderie.
Such practices are still common among Mayan women in Mexico and Guatemala, and among Andean people, who get together with their spindles or looms. It is important to note that relaxed socialization over textile tasks could include men. In Iceland, the kvöldvaka was a time of work and entertainment that traditionally took place in the evenings. Men would sit and card wool for the women as they spun, and all would engage in singing, storytelling, and conversation.

Another moving description of communal textile production again comes from Henry Glassie. Writing about rug weaving in an Anatolian village, he writes of a “quiet, sociable scene” in a home with a big loom:

Talk rises and falls, work continues. A young woman is there with her baby, sitting near the loom to join in the weaver’s conversations. An old gentleman charged for the day with the care of his little granddaughter, comes and sits...in the back. [One weaver’s mother] sits to one side, spinning... When their work enters a difficult passage, the weavers grow quiet, concentrating.

Except at harvest when all hands are busy in the fields, a carpet is rising on the loom in every house, and when the sun is up, two women are at work. Most weaving is done by girls and ladies between the ages of 14 and 25 who form together a special collegial association and unit of affection with each neighborhood... They move fluidly in and out of each other’s homes with no need to knock... They come to visit, and when they visit they sit and weave... [They] sit and tie knots and tighten the bonds between them.

Not surprisingly, children who grow up in households where textile production is the norm like this invariably associate cloth with the community. They learn textile-making skills as a matter of course. Girls in pre-Columbian Andean cultures learned to spin soon after they were old enough to hold a spindle, for example, and they picked up weaving a few years later. Everyone in these communities feels ownership; even though boys may be less involved in some of the textile-making processes, it is all part of daily life. Among the Amazigh of Morocco, men do not weave, but their contribution to weaving is still recognized. They are involved in producing the wool used to make rugs; they herd the sheep, shear them, and sort and wash the fiber. They also help build the looms.

The pleasure of working side by side creating textiles is equally evident in today’s burgeoning craft groups. Knitters, whose work is especially portable, show up in large numbers to attend club or guild meetings, or even to cafes or shops that advertise drop-in knitting times. In 1999, instructors who organized a Knit-Out in New York City actually had to fend off would-be participants because so many had come. The resurgence of knitting engendered “In the Loop,” a three-day international conference held in Britain in 2008. One of its amenities was a knitting lounge open to delegates throughout the conference so they could socialize.
as they worked. In the same vein, I noticed in 2009 that many of the cafes catering to knitters were staying open late to accommodate their patrons.32

European-based cultures developed “bees” for tasks that could profit from concerted group labor. Many of us may be familiar with the quilting bee, where a woman who had finished making a pieced or appliquéd quilt top would call together a group of community women to put in the actual quilting stitches. The bee usually entailed six to eight individuals who sat close to one another around a quilting frame and worked steadily for a number of hours. Before there were good roads, homesteaders in rural areas with severe winters on the American frontier had to wait until spring for these gatherings, and there are many references to the quilting bee as a harbinger of a more social season. When the actual quilting work was complete, the gatherings often ended with a kind of party that included husbands and other family members. A number of vernacular paintings of quilting bees celebrate the social pleasure of the event, and some specifically memorialize the moment when the party could begin.33

Bees for other textile tasks turned into parties too. Sadie Plant claims that many pre-industrial weaving activities involved singing, chanting, storytelling, or game playing.34 It is certainly true that when a task is physically demanding, rhythmic motion and song help make the work easier. The people of the Hebridean islands, off the coast of Scotland, held “waulking” bees in which song was a central element. Waulking was a method of shrinking (fulling) woven woolen cloth through the application of moisture and heavy pressure (it is essentially a felting process). The women of the community would gather around a long trestle, pounding long lengths of fabric with their hands and feet. They had to work in unison and throw their full body weight into the effort, and the songs helped them keep up their energy and maintain a steady rhythm. There were separate
specialists to lead the waulking, the singing, and the accompanying
consecration ceremonies, and each area developed its own repertoire of
anecdotes and music. Scholars consider waulking songs one of the main
preservation vehicles of Celtic culture.

I have been writing primarily about home-based activities, where
women were most typically the fabric-makers. Men were (and are) more
likely to make cloth when it is a particularly prestigious fabric or one that
they themselves use. In West Africa, for example, men routinely weave
the narrow “strip cloth” that is later sewn into important garments. Men
are also the primary workers in professional workshops. The famed
Kashmir (cashmere) shawls of early 19th-century India were woven in workshops
staffed by men, for example, as were the European tapestries and luxury textiles
of the 14th through 16th centuries. (Guild membership, a prerequisite for employment
in many of these workshops, was often
not even open to women.) The exquisite
weavings and embroideries of dynastic
China and Ottoman Turkey were similarly
completed in court workshops, which only employed men. While these
formal settings with assigned overseers probably encouraged less
socialization than domestic contexts, many of these men undoubtedly
also experienced a sense of camaraderie and fellowship through their work.

Even when production was industrialized, people still worked side
by side making cloth, and as the writings of the Lowell, Massachusetts
“mill girls” make clear, meaningful friendships could certainly be made
in those settings. The noise of the equipment and the constant pressure
to keep up with the machinery reduced the opportunities for sharing

Waulking on the Isle of Skye

Twelve or fourteen women, divided into two equal numbers, sit down on each
side of a long board, ribbed lengthways, placing the cloth on it: first they begin
to work it backwards and forwards with their hands, singing at the same time...
When they have tired...[they use their] feet for the same purpose, and six or
seven pair of naked feet are in the most violent agitation, working one against
the other: as by this time they grow very earnest in their labors, the fury of the
song rises; at length it arrives to such a pitch, that without breach of charity you
would imagine a troop of female demoniacs to have assembled.

Thomas Pennant, 1772
and socialization, but people usually find ways to connect with those they work with, and many photographs of mill workers from the turn of the 20th century show them posing together, either in the workplace, or at picnics or other social gatherings.

Socialization was equally salient in the work of selling textiles. (In some cultures or areas of the world, selling is considered men’s work, although this is by no means universal.) In North Africa and the Middle East, rug and textile merchants have for centuries manned bazaar stalls that also functioned as social gathering places. Neighboring merchants visit with one another when business is slow, and customers are invited in for cups of tea and other refreshments. One gaily decorated carpet shop in Morocco provides musical entertainment to attract individuals who might be persuaded to come in and look at the merchandise. In other kinds of markets, salespeople ply their wares in a frenzy of competition. The crowded market in Benares, India is akin in feel to a scene from the floor of the stock exchange, as “commission boys” working for different sari
dealers each try to be heard above the others. Women hawking embroidered suzani in Turkmenistan wave their wares at passersby. In areas where markets are held at regularly rotating locations, market-going becomes a highlight of the week, not just as a source of needed income, but as an opportunity to visit with people of nearby communities and even interact with tourists.

Social bonding sometimes takes place around activities related to caring for textiles. In Homer’s epic, The Odyssey, there is a scene where Odysseus is awakened by the cries of young women enjoying themselves as they are washing clothes in the river—they are stomping the textiles in the pools and making a lively contest of it. Community river washing is still seen today in places where there is no running water; the image of women washing clothes in the river is almost iconic for certain places, including parts of India and Latin America.

**Leisure and play**

To a much greater extent than we may at first realize, fibers and textiles are also part of leisure social activities, celebration, and play. Communal work can be turned into a party-like event, but when we turn to recreational pastimes, we find a wide range of other examples. Strings and cords are used to make musical instruments, and we play with ropes in tug-of-war contests and jump-rope counting games. Many sports are built around getting balls or other objects into or over nets—think of basketball, volleyball, tennis, ping pong, badminton, soccer, hockey, water polo, and lacrosse. Some of those sports “objects” involve textiles as well. Every baseball contains prescribed layers of (primarily woolen) yarn, which gives it resiliency and springiness. The cowhide cover of the ball is even today sewn together by hand, with exactly 108 stitches.37
[left] Once the sail on this “desert fun car” catches the wind, the car is able to travel quickly across the sands. Junaif, Saudi Arabia, 1970.

[below] Piano hammers, made of dense and absorbent felt, help create the dynamic tonal quality of the instrument.

[below, left] Every baseball depends on fiber to make it “work.” In addition to the stitches that hold the outside cowhide cover in the proper shape, the inside is filled with tightly stuffed yarn that gives it a great resilience. The specifications for American major league balls have remained largely unchanged since the 1930s.

[bottom right] The game of basketball is named after the textile (the net) that catches the ball as it falls through the hoop.
Other sports rely on particular fabrics too, whether it is in the equipment, such as the covers of pool tables, or in players' uniforms. The jockeys who race thoroughbred horses wear special "silks," and many of today's more extreme sports rely on new fabrics that hold up to demanding environmental conditions. Spandex, polypropylene, and other fibers have enabled skiers, mountain climbers, and others to push themselves further than ever before, and at the 2004 Olympics, members of Israel's judo team hoped to increase their performance by wearing Zensah® fabric, which contains silver ions that help regulate body temperature. In 2008, Olympic swimmers were assisted by high-tech "supersuits" that reduced drag in the water and increased their buoyancy. Without the bright toreador's cape, there would be no sport of bullfighting. Hot-air balloons also rely on lightweight durable fibers, as do the racing sails mentioned in chapter 2.

Streamer, originally made of ribbon (crepe paper, initially treated as an inexpensive fabric, was substituted in the last century), were wrapped around maypoles in northern Europe, and integrated into Morris dancing in the British Isles. Streamers also helped transform ordinary rooms into party spaces. They were used in early 20th-century parties as "pulls" that might release presents or messages from a table centerpiece (these were especially popular at wedding engagement "announcement parties"). Cloth blindfolds are integral to games such as Blind Man's Bluff or Pin the Tail on the Donkey, in which contestants have to cover their eyes. Children make imaginary forts under stretched blankets, or hide under the covers at night with a flashlight.
Dance and other performance outfits often involve some kind of expansive or mobile cloth that enhances movement. In Peru, indigenous women typically wear many-layered skirts as part of their festival attire. Blenda Femenias, who has studied contemporary embroidery practices in the Colca Valley, says that although the women complain about the heaviness of the garments, the heavy borders are in fact what give the skirts enough weight to fly out into space when the wearer is in action. They actually help the dancers keep spinning.20

Dress-up clothes are an integral part of play the world over. Children love to wrap themselves in grown-ups' garments, but adults also step out of their everyday, serious selves when they put on unfamiliar outfits. The "toga parties" sponsored by American college fraternities in the 1970s were infamous opportunities for revelry; students used bed sheets to turn themselves into imaginary Romans of an earlier day. At the turn of the 20th century, costuming was an accepted part of adult entertainment. Groups of friends loved to pose together as Greek maidens or people of the opposite sex, and took photographs to memorialize their happy experiences. Dress-up was even incorporated into party games, as at a "gingham party" described in 1908. Male guests were each given a piece of fabric with a different

![Maypole dancers at the May Pole on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus at the turn of the 20th century, U.S. The long ribbons attached to the poles were in and out of each other in a picturesque pattern created by the participants' choreographed movements.](image1)

![Dancer performing the Rejone, a traditional Bullfight welcoming dance, 1990s. The garments help exaggerate her body movements.](image2)

![The matador's red cape is essential to the drama of the bullfight. This scene is from the final moments of a bullfight at Las Ventas Bullring, Madrid, Spain, 2008.](image3)
pattern, and told to look for the women who was wearing the matching apron. They then had to hem the apron while the woman was wearing it. This slightly risqué interaction was the cause of much merriment.

In our own time, carnival costuming is a central part of the social calendar for many people. Others’ social lives are largely shaped by their membership in re-enactment groups built around costumed characters. Participants in the Society for Creative Anachronism, for example, dress up as imagined medieval characters. A website that serves as a clearinghouse for re-enactors of all kinds claims, “ANY time period you can think of is re-enacted today.” Many of the groups re-enact wars of the past. These can be very specialized; there is one group that “re-lives” the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War. Increasingly common too are themed dress-up weddings, where both guests and members of the wedding party come in costume (e.g., as Renaissance maidens or Celtic heroes). These events are more informal than the standard “white wedding,” and allow everyone to participate actively.

Several contemporary artists produce a kind of dress-up clothing that intentionally fosters a sense of play and transformation. Robert Hillestad makes “celebration clothes” that allow individuals to access and express the most joyous part of themselves. Nick Cave’s “soundsuits” (they enclose the body and do make noise) have a similar function. Cave delights in the way that people who put on these garments “rejoice in the experience.” They “step outside their day-to-day existence,” feeling “light within the moment.”
Rallying to the flag
Textiles often help much larger groups bond together. Flags, as an important case in point, both symbolize and function as tangible expressions of what are in some senses intangible entities—extensive and diverse geographic areas, political territories, and abstract concepts and beliefs. National flags become literal representatives of the national "body." This was evidenced in the U.S. by Congressional attempts to pass a constitutional amendment against flag mutilation, or army regulations against allowing a flag to become tattered. American citizens pledge allegiance to a flag first, and then to the nation for which it stands. Throughout the world, soldiers speak of willingness to die for their flags.

The emotional importance of these textiles is also clear from the huge amounts of money and attention that are invested in them. The "Star Spangled Banner," the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write what became the U.S. national anthem in 1814, has had a place of honor in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., since 1918. Over $18,000,000 was expended on its preservation between 1998 and 2002. More than 7 million people watched the Smithsonian conservators at work.54

The symbolic and emotional power that flags hold as a sign of broader group identity is also demonstrated in the American controversy about flying the Confederate flag over the South Carolina statehouse. It had first been raised over the building to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Civil War—a decision that was made by an all-white legislature. For those men, the flag stood for regional pride. For others, it represented embedded racism, and symbolized division and hate. In protest, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized a national boycott against South Carolina's $14 billion-a-year tourism industry in 1999. Feelings ran high; as one senator put it, "If you take that flag down, the next morning 10,000 flags just like it will be hoisted all over the state. The rebels will still yell."55 Many conventions and business organizations complied with the boycott, costing the state millions of dollars, and the next year the legislators succumbed to pressure and agreed to remove the flag. Nevertheless, it was by no means a complete victory for the NAACP.

A modified version billed as a "more traditional version of the battle flag" was still allowed to fly from a tall flagpole. Another boycott is ongoing at the time of writing in 2010, and some African-Americans have tried to introduce a flag of their own or to appropriate the Confederate flag by changing its colors to the red, green, and black of the African liberation movement.56

Flags that represent contested national identity have been powerful throughout the world. Examples from the 20th century include the flags representing the African National Congress (South Africa) and the Palestinian state. Both were once outlawed by the dominant political regime in their respective countries, and people who displayed them in any form were subject to punishment and reprisals. The Wiphala is a flag that represents Bolivian indigenous rights. It was dramatically displayed
in May 2005 when thousands of indigenous people marched into the capital, La Paz, carrying the Wiphala and demanding nationalization of the country's natural gas resources. Under the leadership of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who is of Aymara heritage himself, this actually came to pass. The symbolic communicative message of the Wiphala is discussed in chapter 5.

There are now flags that represent an even broader global citizenship. The United Nations flag, which includes an image of the globe and symbolizes a world of peace and unity, has flown on every continent since the middle of the 20th century. In the 1970s, we started flying another textile symbolizing oneness: the Earth Flag. The NASA image of the Earth seen from space that was broadcast on television during the 1969 moon landing allowed us to see our planet—and ourselves—from a bigger, “outside” perspective. Visionary John McConnell had the image printed on a flag and put it into production. There were soon campaigns in America to get such a flag into every elementary school classroom, and while that goal was never realized, Earth Flags are often used now to celebrate ecological consciousness and ethnic diversity. Often, classes work to earn an Earth Flag in much the same way a Scout works to earn a badge. McConnell states:

The Earth Flag is for all Earth people. Its purpose is to encourage equilibrium in nature, in social systems, and in the minds of men...
Another purpose is to foster loyalty to Earth that will transcend national loyalties and differences... It tells us our most important task is to take care of our planet.  

Textile-making, charity, and community
As the discussion of comfort bags indicated, the very act of textile-making could itself be a way to express solidarity with a national or larger entity. American women made myriad types of textiles for the troops during the Civil War. Knitted socks and mittens were especially valued on the front, and women on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line provided a constant supply. Emma Le Conte, a Southerner, claimed she had become so adept at knitting that she no longer had to look at her work; she could read and knit at the same time. Catherine Edmondston noted with astonishment in her 1863 diary that Butler, the Union general occupying New Orleans, had even issued an order making "knitting needles Contraband of War."  

Women in the North also formed societies to provide for the soldiers. Most worked through the previously mentioned U.S. Sanitary Commission, which coordinated the efforts of the different societies and got the supplies through to the front on overcrowded military trains. (The provision of comfort bags was just a tiny bit of their work; for the most part they provided necessities such as bedding, clothing, and bandages.) The output of just one small group is quite astonishing. When this is multiplied by the more than 10,000 active aid societies, it is clear just how remarkable this effort was. (Over time, the demands for particular societies became even more complex. As there were increasing numbers of wounded, more and more supplies...
Albanian girls knitting, c.1914. This photograph was taken by the American Red Cross as a part of their relief efforts.

*1000* old towels and *350* new towels
*482* sheets
*39* pillows, *109* pillowcases
*63* bedspreads, *62* quilts, *3* blankets
*705* shirts
*432* pairs of socks, *230* pairs of drawers,
*155* pairs of slippers, *51* pairs of mittens
*53* double wrappers
*53* enameled cloth havelocks (hoods), *50* cape
*420* handkerchiefs
*1008* rolls of bandage, *115* boxes of lint (for padding bandages); 40 compresses
*unspecified* quantity of linen, cotton and woven rag

Statistics from a clipping from the *Hampshire Gazette*, 1862 (exact date unclear), found in the Northampton, Massachusetts Historical Society.

The same kind of solidarity and patriotism was demonstrated in other places and during other wars. New Zealand women formed aid societies two days after World War I was announced in that country. They too approached the task with fervor and sophistication, and supplied items ranging from comfort bags to hospital dressings, face cloths, and stockings. Girl's as young as five knitted bandages.

“Lady Liverpool” published a 393 page book with knitting patterns for other wartime needs. Socks were in particular demand: soldiers on the front reported that a single pair would last less than a fortnight. Despite the increasing presence of commercial goods, knitting campaigns were still significant during World War II. “KNIT NOW,” insisted the New York-based Citizens Committee for the Army and Navy, which provided khaki yarns suitable for sweaters. The stories told by Elizabeth Erbe, who remembers “knitting all day for the soldiers” during that war, echo those of previous generations. She said knitters put their names in their completed sweaters, communicating clearly to the troops that the garments had been made with a sense of love.

In more recent wars, expressions of support have been extended to the families of fallen soldiers. As a response to the conflicts in Iraq and
Afghanistan, three independent organizations arose in the U.S. with volunteers committed to supplying at least one quilt to each such family. They pledge to keep making quilts as long as soldiers are dying. The phenomenon is spreading: one of the groups, the "Home of the Brave Quilt Project," has fledging chapters in Australia, Germany, and Britain. That makes textiles to honor their own war losses. These quilts too usually arrive with inscriptions of encouragement and other personal messages. The quilt-makers say that reaching out in this compassionate way gives them a sense of purpose and helps them feel part of the human family.

Expressions of solidarity and community caring are of course not limited to times of war, and there are countless instances of people using textiles to help others in need. The North American efforts described are representative of a broader, worldwide phenomenon, and many of these projects are in any case global in scope. Donations of blankets and tent panels poured in from around the world to those displaced by the tsunami that devastated Asia in 2005. That same year, when Louisiana, Quilts, Inc., called for donations that could be distributed to New Orleans evacuees from Hurricane Katrina, they received almost 3,000 quilts and other bedding material in just over a week. Eventually the group had so many donations that it asked people to stop sending them. Blankets also started moving across the world after the 2010 earthquakes in Haiti and Chile.

Similar ongoing relief efforts include "Warm-Up America," which collects 7 x 9 inch (18 x 23 centimeter) knitted sections that can be joined together into blankets donated to institutions such as battered women's shelters and group homes that serve those with AIDS; Project Linus, which delivers homemade "security blankets" to seriously ill or traumatized children (the 300 U.S. chapters have processed over 400,000 blankets), and Quilts From Caring Hands, which assembles quilts from high-contrast; fabrics and donates them to visually impaired children. A particularly poignant cloth outreach project originated in my own department at the University.

[above] Detail of a quilt made by Operation Homefront Quilts and Caprock Quilters in Clovis, New Mexico, U.S., for the father of a soldier who died in Iraq in 2007.

[below, left] These outfits, small enough for a deceased premature infant, were made as part of a service project by a group of college students in Wisconsin, U.S.

[below, right] Cheerful "chemo caps" are lovingly created for people who are losing their hair as they undergo chemotherapy. They are usually made as a gesture of support—sometimes by friends, but also by anonymous strangers. This one, made in Hawaii by Row Porter ("Bows Gallery"), features colorful fibrous "hair."
of Wisconsin-Madison. Recognizing that parents who lost premature infants wanted to dress the babies nicely for their funeral but could not find clothes that were tiny enough, Textile and Apparel Design students drafted patterns for "micro-preemie" outfits and sewed prototypes for local hospitals. When requests for the pattern came in from other institutions, the students (and later the hospital) willingly obliged by providing it free of charge.54

While any object that had been made with such good intentions and sent to struggling people would likely be received with gratitude, the universality of textiles makes them particularly potent messengers in a global context. Everyone, in every culture, uses and understands cloth; everyone has kinesthetic experience with fabric and its comforting properties. An understanding of cloth-making processes may serve as another layer of connection. As knitting instructor Nancy Bush expressed it, "knitting is a means of binding my life together with the lives of all the knitters, men and women, who have knitted before me."55

In addition to sending and receiving complete textiles, individuals from different cultures may also come together by working together on the same cloth. This is not a new idea. When the city-states of Elba and Pisa were at odds with one another in ancient Greece, women helped resolve the conflict through a shared textile project. Sixteen wise representatives from each community collaboratively wove a garment for a statue of Hera, the goddess of marriage, every four years. Their joint effort symbolized a kind of intercultural marriage, and helped to untangle what had been tangled.54

In our shrinking world, these projects have an even more global reach. Two large textiles were part of the ceremony at the United Nations at the Millennial Peace Day in September 2000. The Cloth of Many Colors, originally envisioned by "peace troubadour" James Twyman, was described as a mile-long quilt, made from hundreds of swatches of fabric contributed by people throughout the world. The John Denver Memorial Peace Cloth similarly contained patches from around the globe. Several years later, after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, Terry Helwig had a vision in which she saw people around the world tying their threads together. She initiated "The Thread Project: One World, One Cloth" that would represent the composite effort of thousands of "thread ambassadors."

"Just as every thread makes a difference in the cloth," Helwig believes, "every person makes a difference in the world."55

Others are creating textile-related public art projects that draw attention to social and environmental concerns. Wertheim's Institute for Figuring in Los Angeles has initiated a Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef project that builds on Daina Taimina's crocheted model of hyperbolic space, which was mentioned in chapter 1. The Wertheim sisters elaborated on
Dr Taimina's techniques and developed a taxonomy of reef life forms, including loopy "kelps," fringed "anemones," and crenelated "sea slugs." Crocheters from around the world contribute woolen elements that collectively create life-size reefs, which are being exhibited internationally. The project was designed to raise consciousness about the effects of global warming on the "world's largest organism," the Great Barrier Reef. In 2007, the International Fiber Collaborative's World Reclamation Art Project (WRAP) highlighted global dependence on oil. Founder Jennifer Marsh covered (wrapped) a long-abandoned gas station with stitched-together panels that had been contributed by more than 3,000 people from seventeen countries. Each panel commented on oil. When put together, they formed a "gigantic, fitted cozy" that enclosed the building, the gas pumps, and even the light poles. The next year Marsh invited people to submit fabric leaves to be attached to a full-size tree. Her comment echoes Helwig's idea of a greater whole: "Much as a tree is interdependent on its leaves and roots for survival," Marsh states, "societies are interdependent on the greater whole, family units, communities, and countries."

I introduce these projects in this chapter in relation to textiles and community. Some of them also have to do with prayer and spiritual connection, however, and I will return to them in that context in chapter 6. First, though, we will look at more earth-bound activities. In chapter 4, I address how textiles are used in trade, and a less happy subject: the ways in which they are utilized to keep some people in positions of power over others.