

Mary Spyrou talking about her mother's village of Alithinou, Pitsilia, a mountainous region in Cyprus

My connections to textiles are very deep.

Both my parents are from subsistence farming communities which wove their own textiles. In **my mother's stone** built house five children and their parents lived in one room with a treadle loom in the corner. There was a separate storage area for all the clay vats called *pitharia* for the storage of wine, olive oil and grain with smaller glazed jars for cheese and pig's fat. They had fields, some way off, where my grandfather cultivated the land. He also went off to work on other farms to earn money. Sadly, now the house is in a derelict state and no longer belongs to the family.

Much fabric was woven at home, but my grandfather also brought machine made fabric from Nicosia.

In their house silkworms were kept on slatted bamboo mats in the rafters of the house. My mother recollected their munching noise of the mulberry leaves which could be heard. On the Annunciation day 25th March, the day the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary she was going to give birth to Jesus, my grandmother would take the silk worm eggs wrapped in a cloth, to the church, to be blessed carrying them under her armpits, to keep them warm and alive. An itinerant silk winder *metaxaz* would come to the village to do the winding of silk threads from the silk cocoons. He would drop the silk worms into a large copper vat of boiling water. The silk would be woven into sheets using a cotton warp - four loom widths would be sewn together to make a single sheet. The woven silk was also made into valances and curtains for the matrimonial bed. Cotton and wool were also used to make bed linen and cloth. Rag rugs called *halims* or *kourelou* were made with old textiles cut into strips.

My mother was born in the 1920s so this was happening in the early part of the century until she left her village. She was weaving by her early teens. Rag weaving was used for bed covers and floor coverings. Nothing was wasted in the village - everything was re-cycled. Knitting was also done a lot. My mother describes a knitted dress she made that was pleated. Bed linen was sometimes embroidered with cross stitch. Madder was grown in the village and it still grows there today and is used to dye eggs for Easter. Different areas in Cyprus had their characteristic and shared traditions. My family made their own clothes. My mother had a singer sewing machine. It was one of the first things she bought as a teenager. She earned money working as part of a road building gang, during British Colonial Rule. Going away

from home with her cousin Panayiotis, sleeping top to tail. When she left for England in 1955, she gave her sewing machine to her eldest sister Maria and I hope it is still in my aunt's house. Now my cousins' house.

Along with many other Cypriots, when she migrated to UK my mother had her sewing skills and so could earn a living. This is why there were many Cypriot women who found work in clothing manufacture, in small factories, and quite a few Cypriot men were tailors in London. In the past the dowry system was important and textiles were an important part. There was an Irish sewing machine that did a kind of satin stitch - machine embroidery was used on pillow cases; also needle lace and crochet were done. The weaving was done throughout the year, but outdoor jobs had to be finished first, so probably more was done in the winter time. My mother would have to make bread at 4 - or 5 in the morning. It was all work, work, work to survive. **The winters were very hard in my mother's village with deep snowfalls covering the surrounding mountains.** My grandfather had a donkey; it was their main means of transport. He had vineyards and land on the stepped terraces in the mountains where he grew vines, barley, apples, pears, cherries, almonds, cob nuts and walnuts. The terraces are abandoned now. In the 1970s people moved to cities as the schools gradually closed due to rural **depopulation. There was no secondary school in my mother's village, so my family** went to Nicosia. She remained. Really once the schools closed, people went to the cities to find work. **My cousins eventually moved to Nicosia and only my mum's sister remained in the village** and she, until recently, still worked the land. My mother always said they were hard but happy times. They were very poor but there was always food.

When very young my mother was taken out of school to herd goats - there were fines administered if the goats strayed onto other people's land. She was sent off to the forestry commission to learn how to graft trees. She learnt many skills - how to survive which set her in good stead for life. Both of my grandfathers were charcoal burners, which was a way of making extra money. My mother remembers her father going out to a charcoal pit which he had made and it snowed so much she was worried he had died in the snow, and she went off **with her brother Andreas to try and find him. My mother's father wore pleated baggy** pantaloons called a *vraga* which were dyed from walnut husks to get the characteristic black colour. The only time he wore trousers was when he came to England in the early 1960s and my mother had to get him into trousers.

In London my mother became a textile pieceworker, working at home once she was married, and I used to help her as she had passed her skills on to me.

The husks of the silk cocoons would be cut up and used to create framed pictorial textiles on velvet. Here is one I bought in a junk shop in Nicosia. (Mary holds it up in front of the camera). This was practiced in low lying villages.

Weaving silk was not a pleasurable experience for many women. My mother did not complain too much - **her sister was the main weaver. But later I heard my aunt's loom was burnt for firewood.** Weaving in the village was **not done for sale; it was for people's own family use,** part of a domestic tradition and important part of folk art heritage.

My grandfather bought one sheep a year and that wool was both used for stuffing mattresses and for spinning into yarn using a drop spindle. The wool was taken to the river to wash before stuffing the mattresses. Mattresses were made communally by the women in the village, for the marriage bed. The mattress would be blessed and then paraded at the marriage, a celebration which lasted four days. This tradition continued in some villages right up till the 1990s. Babies were put on the **bed for encourage fertility. At my aunt's wedding in London,** a large plastic doll was put on her matrimonial bed to encourage fertility.

In my mother's **village in the mountains, fabrics were largely plain.** The quality of weaving varied between different women. The dowry fabrics would be on public display at a brides wedding – to show her skills. Not all women wove. There would be only one loom in each household. I wish I had asked many more questions of my mother.

The woven textiles and sets of clothes were stored in family dowry chest called a *sentouki*. I **have my aunt's silk sheets which she did not use much.** The sheets lasted years – everything was hand washed and if you are poor you look after things, and they were washed in river water and cottons boiled, with no detergent, and were also washed less often, so lasted longer.

I have no photos of my mother in Cyprus as there was no camera in the family, so I do not know about her clothes, except she knitted a yellow pleated dress which was very beautiful.