

# Textile Heritage of North and East Lithuania: National Overshot Fabrics

## Abstract

*Lithuania has deep traditions in hand-loom weaving. This paper deals with the evaluation and systematisation of North and East Lithuanian hand woven overshot fabrics. This textile heritage has not yet been investigated thoroughly. Investigations of authentic woven fabrics, their patterns, colours as well as weaving technologies are presented with special regard for textile identification, technological analysis and experience of masters. The importance lies in the fact that not only original articles are still extant for Lithuanian rural masters or with their families but the existence of these original works up to now has been undisclosed. In this study textile materials from the last 150 years were investigated. All the data for this research was collected directly from the textile masters during numerous expeditions by the authors in 2013, and in this study we present woven fabrics and weaving traditions as a significant expression of the ethno-cultural identity of an individual and the region.*

**Key words:** folk fabric, pattern, textile heritage, weaving technique.

## Introduction

Folk art is vitally inherent to Lithuania and through the old traditions of forefathers, original folk art beautifully crafted with woven textiles has remained with us. It is not to say that it is absolutely necessary to copy old patterns, but these are a great and authentic source of inspiration for modern contemporary textile design. Textile and clothing of the new millennium [1] are most often inspired by ethno-wear, simple in style and high-tech due to the usage of high technologies in manufacture. Analysis of both world national textiles as well as Lithuanian folk textile is very significant [2] because one can discover the originality of a nation's character, traditions, and customs. Besides, the art of weaving has always been important not only in fulfilling everyday needs but also in the tradition of preparing a dowry, for example, in Turkish tribes [3] i.e., nations located far from the Baltic region.

For centuries Lithuanian woven fabrics have had important and diverse applications in everyday life, festivities and rituals. Home interiors were decorated with bed, table and floor covers, towels, sashes and mats. At weddings, the bride's textile dowry played an important role; fabrics were given as gifts, and guests used to dress up in national costumes. In christening ceremonies the sash was of great significance. The apron used to be a symbol of virginity, virtue and honour

to the woman. In funeral ceremonies the lay-out place, room and setting were decorated with textile spreads, sashes and towels. Besides this hand-made textiles decorated church altars, floors and vestry interior, as well as being used to clothe procession participants and for flags [4]. The ornaments of Lithuanian folk fabrics have specific features of composition, which are influenced by such factors as the weaving technique, raw materials, and specific use [2]. Moreover how and where the fabric is used has an influence on the composition and character of ornament and also predetermines the choice of raw materials and structure of the fabric. The ornaments of Lithuanian folk textile [5, 6], especially from the standpoint of ethnology and national culture as well as the semantics, was examined. A software package for the creation of a database which would enable the storage of ornamentations of national fabrics was presented [7]. The ornaments of Lithuanian pick-up sashes and overshot fabrics were analysed using the original computer-aided data bank, which stores exhibits collected from the resources of the National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum (Kaunas, Lithuania) [8]. The ornaments and weaves of folk Lithuanian shawls as well as analysis of the weave connection to the colour ornament and fibre are presented in [9]. The patterns, weaves, variety and prevalence of Lithuanian folk skirts and the peculiarities of their colour combinations were investigated in [10, 11]. Data for this research was collected from the textile collection of the Folk Art department of the National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum. Similar subjects were also studied by Latvian scientists [12, 13]. Bed spread colour compositions and patterns of Latvia at the end of the

19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were classified [12]. The significance is that the ornaments, colours and patterns of folk textile could be used as a source for modern designs [13]. Such investigations are also important from the interdisciplinary point of view [14]. The identification and analysis of weaving techniques and structures of authentic folk fabrics will give possibilities for the comparison and disclosure of the historical-cultural evolution of woven patterns in the context of neighbouring countries and world cultures.

Paper [15] presents an analysis of the woven ornamentation of traditional Greek textiles from the area of the Aegean that are currently stored in the collections of various museums in Greece as well as at the Victoria & Albert Museum collection (London, UK). The materials mostly used were cotton, silk, linen and wool in various combinations, e.g. silk motifs on a cotton-silk ground. The main motifs used were geometric and symmetrical diamonds, eight pointed stars, stylised plants and figures of bilateral symmetry, and simple geometric shapes. Furthermore the authors stated that apart from the similarity in the decoration of woven textiles observed in the neighbouring areas of Greece – the wider area of the Balkans and Near East, the same relation of weave technology with motifs is also observed geographically further, where the same techniques are used, i.e. for traditional Lithuanian and Latvian woven textiles.

Lithuania has deep historical traditions in hand-woven fabrics and they are still manufactured in rural areas, representing typical fabrics closely connected to



Figure 1. Territory of Lithuania and area investigated.

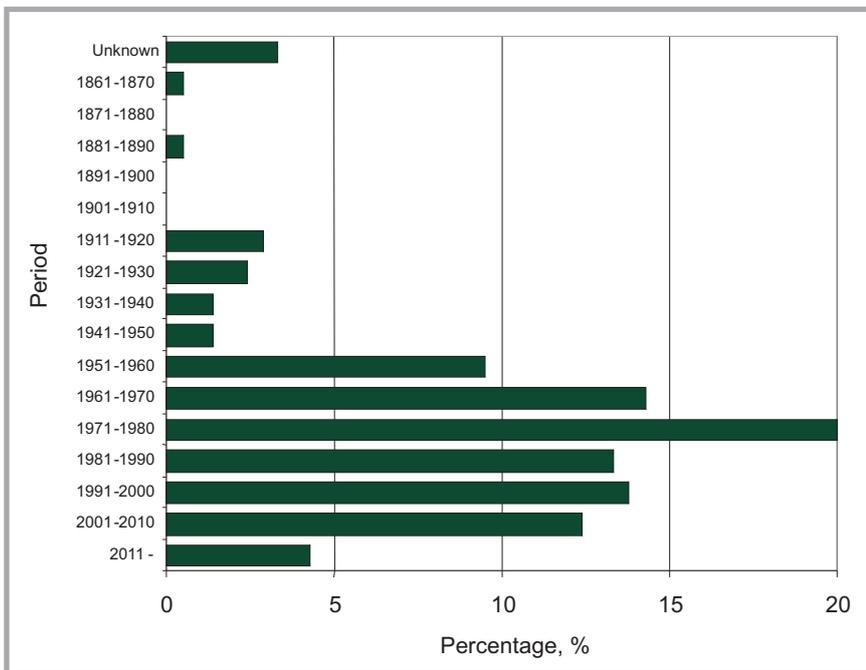


Figure 2. Chronological distribution of woven fabrics investigated.

local identity and sense of belonging to a particular geographic area and cultural traditions. Of course, such product information plays a role in conditioning a consumer's choice. Moreover this approach can be of major importance for tourists [16] looking for textile products with traits of typicality and authenticity.

The authentic folk fabrics of rural parts of North and East Lithuania have not yet been investigated essentially because they are stocked by the masters or their families, and only numerous expeditions could gather sufficient data. Overshot fabrics as well as their patterns, weaving traditions, colours, and usage possibilities

have not been discovered and analysed before, despite this heritage being very luxuriant in colours, weaves, ornaments, and expression. Hopefully this paper will further greatly the continuity and renewal of ethnic culture in this Lithuanian region and make a positive impact on the revival of rural weaving and the development of national activity. Therefore the aim of this investigation was to collect, register and evaluate the textile heritage – folk overshot fabrics – stocked by weavers and their families' private collections in the territories of North and East Lithuania as well as to show the peculiarities of home weaving traditions, the singularity of fabric patterns, and the weaving

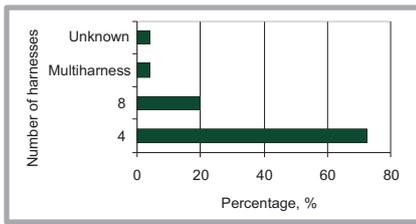
technique by highlighting territorial and chronological distribution tendencies.

## Experimental results and discussion

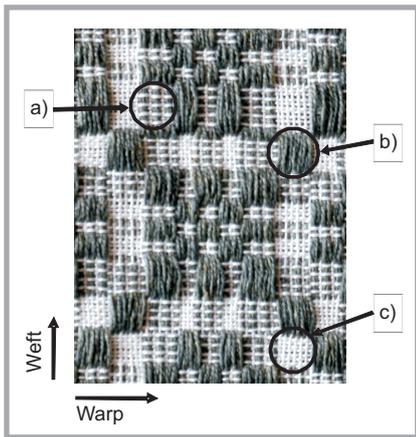
The object of the investigation was folk overshot fabrics – (in Lithuanian called 'dimai') - collected during expeditions undertaken in 2013 into the rural territories of North and East Lithuania. **Figure 1** presents the territory of Lithuania and the area investigated. This area includes 3 districts (Vilnius, Panevėžys, and Utena) within 9 regions. The territories of North and East Lithuania include the largest ethnographic region, which has an extremely rural character with many villages where an older and quieter way of life has been preserved. This region is also very famous for colourful textiles and national costumes. The colours of the textile here are very bright, lively, and with various patterns of original composition and ornamentation. As the result of the current study samples of 210 woven articles were newly found and examined.

Overshot fabrics are woven by plain weave from one ground set of warps and one ground set of wefts, and the pattern is made from one more set of wefts. The patterning wefts are interlaced with warps into the upper (face) and under (reverse) side of the fabric, creating small areas of long weft floats.

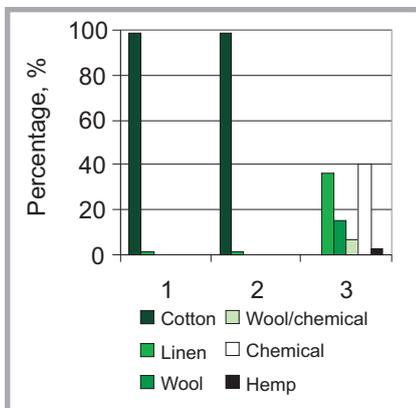
We also studied chronological data of the fabrics gathered during our expeditions. From a chronological point of view, a large number of the overshot fabrics examined have an exact date of their manufacture because the masters presented these articles by themselves. Our data show that overshot fabrics have old traditions in North and East Lithuania. According to the periods of weaving, all fabrics were classified into sixteen groups. As it can be seen from the results of this research (**Figure 2**), the overshot fabrics are from different periods of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but their quantities have been large since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. from the 6<sup>th</sup> decade. From the period 1951 - 1960 up to recent decades these articles were widespread and traditional textiles in folk art. 20.0% of the fabrics investigated are attributed to the period 1971 - 1980. The other examples also make up large quantities: 13.8 - 14.3% for each decade during the period 1961 - 2000 and 12.4% in the



**Figure 3.** Distribution of fabrics investigated according to the number of harnesses used.



**Figure 4.** Fragment of construction of overshot fabric woven using 4 harnesses; a) Half-tone of short pattering weft, b) Pure tone of long pattering weft, c) Pure tone of ground yarns.



**Figure 5.** Raw material of overshot fabrics investigated: 1 – ground warp, 2 – ground weft, 3 – pattering weft.

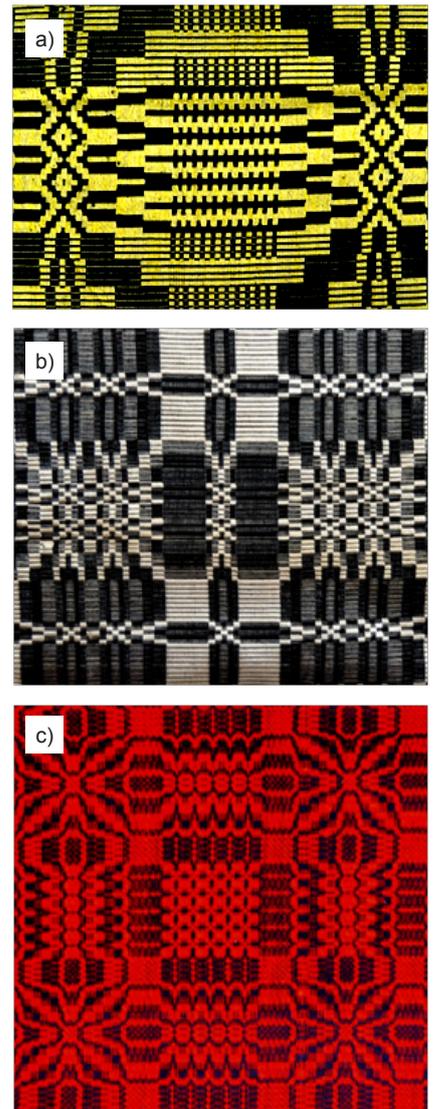
decade 2001 - 2010. Smaller quantities are observed for period of 1911 - 1960: 1.4 - 9.5%. One important fact noticed was that 0.5% of the fabrics were made even in the 1861 - 1870 and 1881 - 1890 periods, illustrating the importance and worth of such heritage retention by the families of masters and hence could be recognised as important element in Lithuanian rural culture. Although the production of some textile moved from the home to a factory and from home-makers to professionals, hand weaving contin-

ued to be a practiced in Lithuania and the usage of home-made textile was very frequent. Furthermore the hand weaving of overshot fabrics survives up to now: 4.3% of the fabrics were made during the last period, i.e. since 2011, which could be related to efforts to save the cultural traditions of progenitors.

The distribution of all fabrics investigated - *dimai* - according to the number of harnesses used (**Figure 3**) was established. Fabrics woven using 4 harnesses make up the biggest part (72.4%), as it is the simplest way to manufacture overshot fabrics, but the creation and realisation of the ornaments is not very limited. **Figure 4** presents a fragment of the construction of overshot fabric - *dimai* - woven using 4 harnesses. Here the patterns are made of three colour tones: two pure tones (of long pattering weft and ground yarns) and one half-tone (of short pattering weft). Fabrics woven using 8 harnesses make up 20.0% of all articles, whereas the number of fabrics manufactured using more than 8 harnesses is minimal, which is understandable because the master must be highly experienced for such a weaving technique.

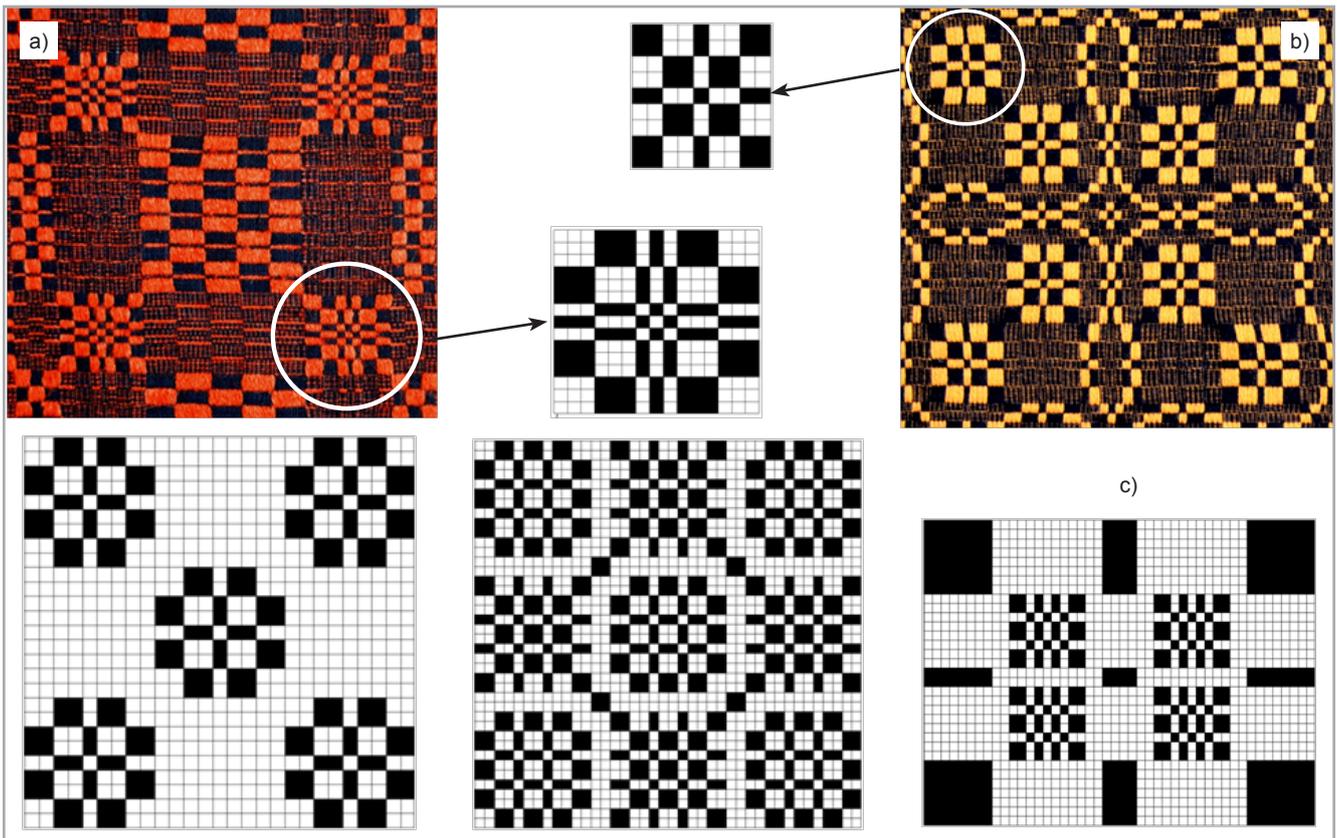
Linen, wool, cotton and chemical (manufactured) fibres are the most important used for clothing and household fabrics of *dimai* (**Figure 5**). Fragments of such fabrics are presented in **Figures 6 - 8**. **Figure 7** also presents a graphical view of a cat's feet motif and patterns.

Cotton spun yarns are popular for their small linear density and good strength. Because it is difficult to process and takes up so much of the master's time, linen fibre has become the central point of Lithuanian rural culture. Linen spun yarns are in common use for all textile products. The *suffering of flax* is a common theme of folk tales, songs, and rituals. The wool from Lithuanian sheep breeds is quite coarse but wool spun yarns are strongly favoured for overshot fabrics because of their longevity, warmth, thickness, bulky appearance, and utility. Other materials are also used to weave overshot fabrics, namely hemp yarns and blended yarns from wool/chemical fibres, but they are not as traditional as the ones mentioned previously. In general, the fabrics are nearly always woven using different types of fibres rather than being made out of one pure fibre. For *dimai* chemical, linen or wool yarns are mainly used as a pattering weft for creat-

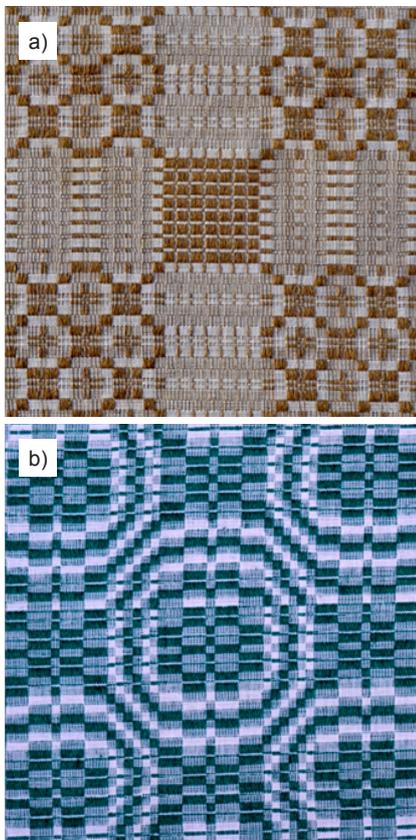


**Figure 6.** Patterns of cotton/chemical overshot fabrics: a) Kupiškis region, 1973, 8 harnesses, b) Ukmergė region, 1973, 4 harnesses, c) Švenčionys region, 1995, 4 harnesses.

ing ornaments, and cotton yarns are used for the ground weft and warp, i.e. for the background of the fabric. It was found that the combinations of two fibrous components comprise 99.5% of all overshot fabrics investigated and only 0.5% of the articles are made using pure fibres. Chemical yarns are mostly preferred for the pattering weft. This choice is greatly dependent on the fact that dyed chemical yarns yield more lustrous, brilliant and sharp colours: yellow (**Figure 6.a**), black (**Figure 6.b**), red (**Figure 6.c**), blue, and green. Meanwhile the use of cotton and linen for ground warp and ground weft is natural because in this case less bright colours are preferred and so-called natural grey or brownish linen and uncoloured raw cotton colours are suitable. Besides this bleached linen yarns (plain



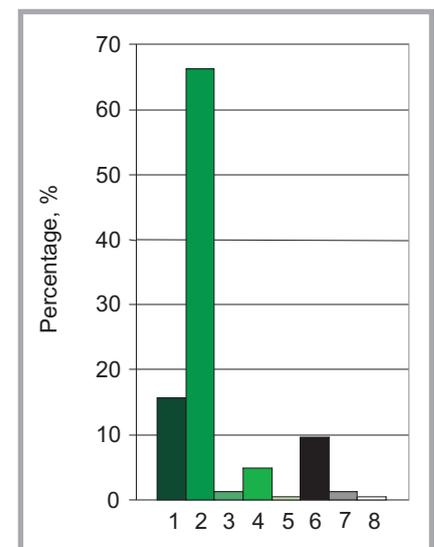
**Figure 7.** Patterns of cotton/wool overshot fabrics and graphical view of cat's feet motif: a) Ukmergė region, ~1980, 4 harnesses, b) Zarasai, 2005-2006, 4 harnesses, c) examples of cat's feet patterns.



**Figure 8.** Patterns of cotton/linen overshot fabrics woven using 4 harnesses: a) Utena region, 1978, b) Utena region, 1983-1993, (linen - coloured).

white) are also popular. The samples of lighter and darker natural colours of flax are combined together or white colour is used for the whole fabric, which is an inherent feature of table covers and towels. Although these fabrics are plain in colour, their natural appearance exhibits authentic and unique patterns. It was established that the combinations of frequently used fibre components are cotton/chemical (39.5%) and cotton/linen (35.7%). Others were also established: cotton/wool (13.3%), cotton/wool/chemical (6.7%), and cotton/hemp (2.4%). Linen/wool, linen/chemical or pure linen variants are rare. A large part of linen, wool, hemp, and chemical fabrics are made from dyed (using industrial dyestuff, rare – natural vegetable dyes) or bleached home-spun yarn manufactured by the weavers themselves. It is worthy to note that the Lithuanian woman's status and prestige for long time periods was based on her ability to spin finely; her dowry was the result of her own spun yarns and woven articles and spinning and weaving tools as well as traditions were passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter, reminding of national identity.

Analysis of Lithuanian folk skirts [10] also distinguished these popular raw materials: over half of the 258 skirts investigated were from union wool fabric (the warp is linen or cotton, the weft - wool), about 1/3 of the skirts - woollen, and 1/10 of skirts were from linen or cotton with



**Figure 9.** Use possibilities of overshot fabrics investigated: 1) Towel, 2) Bed spread, 3) Cloth for lay-out place, 4) Table cover, 5) Horsecloth/bodycloth, 6) Bed spread/table cover, 7) Part of folk costume, 8) Curtain.

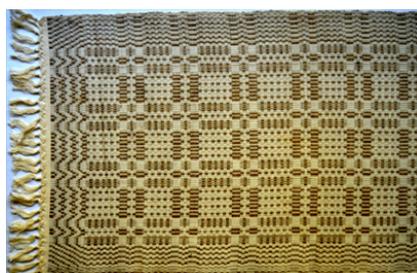
linen. Prosperous peasant women started to use cotton for skirts from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Figure 9** presents the use possibilities of the overshot fabrics investigated, most of which are described as bed spreads, towels, and table covers or as having a double usage: bed spread and table cover. Such interior fabrics are very popular because of their everyday usage and practical value. Towels, besides being utilitarian, perform other function as well: the most beautiful ones hang on towel racks to decorate the house. Other applications are as cloth for the lay-out place, horse/body cloth, in folk costume, or as curtain material. Examples of a bed spread (**Figure 10**), towels with braided tuft trimmings (**Figure 11**), and a horsecloth/body cloth with tassel trimmings (**Figure 12**) are presented.

Research [10] showed that checked and striped Lithuanian folk skirts were produced in large quantities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but these quantities decreased at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when new patterns were being designed. Overlaid, pick-up and overshot patterns, which were normally used in aprons, started to be adapted for use also as skirt fabrics. The usage of various fancy patterns rose at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when colouring became darker [9]. These facts have a direct relation with European fashion, which actively influenced the clothing of country people at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the period from around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lithuanian weavers brought patterns from Latvia and used them for shawls, skirts, other cloth fabrics. Overshot patterns, which were used earlier in interiors, combined with different weaves appeared in skirts. The patterns of our research are made from squares and rectangles of various sizes (**Figures 6 - 8**), which is also an inherent feature of motley *dimai* (**Figure 13**). The ornaments used are generally easily distinguished, understood and recognised. According to Lithuanian folk art patriarch A. Tamošaitis [17], the patterns of *dimai* are made from planes of different sizes combining small and large ones as well as adapting the lines next to them. From geometrical elements motifs are created from the patterns: cat's feet or cudweed, a window, a cross, star, oak leaf, harrow, etc. Symbolic meaning is very significant here. For example, the cross is a symbol of sun or fire, and the



**Figure 10.** National overshot fabric: common view of a bed spread, master – O. Augulienė, 1973, cotton/silk, 4 harnesses, 142 × 184 cm, Utena region.



**Figure 11.** National overshot fabrics: common view of towels: a) master – Z. Kaunietienė, Anykščiai region, ~1953, cotton/linen, 40.5 × 192 cm, 4 harnesses, b) master – B. Baranauskienė, Švenčionys region, 1983, cotton/linen, 35 × 185 cm, 4 harnesses.

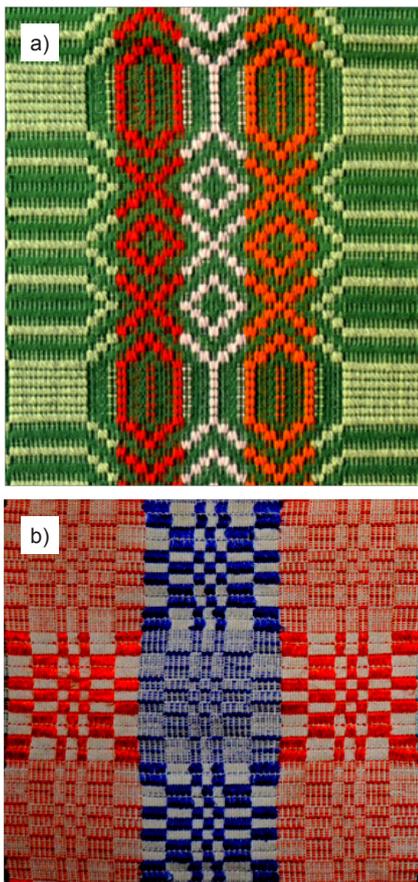


**Figure 12.** National overshot fabric: common view of the horsecloth/body-cloth, master – T. Dunčiūtė, 1912-1918, cotton/wool, 4 harnesses, 75 × 100 cm, Molėtai region.

star is related to hope and regeneration. Various patterns made from similar geometrical configurations are created by the weavers of Lithuania's neighbouring states: Latvia, Poland, Belarus, the Scandinavian countries, and Germany. Such motifs are highly visible in the fabrics investigated in the current study: cat's feet (**Figure 7**), an oak leaf (**Figure 6.a**), etc. Geometrical elements in overshot fabrics – *dimai* - of four harnesses are connected by angles. These fabrics distinguish

themselves by their ripple view, created from two pure tones and one halftone, which is very evident from the example presented in **Figure 8.b**.

Researches have revealed that similar cudweed form ornamentation has been woven in many ways. It is obvious that the majority of the ornamentation motifs are typical for the entire territory of Lithuania, with slight differences of naming. Moreover in many places in Lithua-



**Figure 13.** View of motley striped overshoot fabrics: a) Utena region, 1973, cotton/chemical, 4 harnesses, b) Švenčionys region, ~1953, cotton/chemical, 4 harnesses.

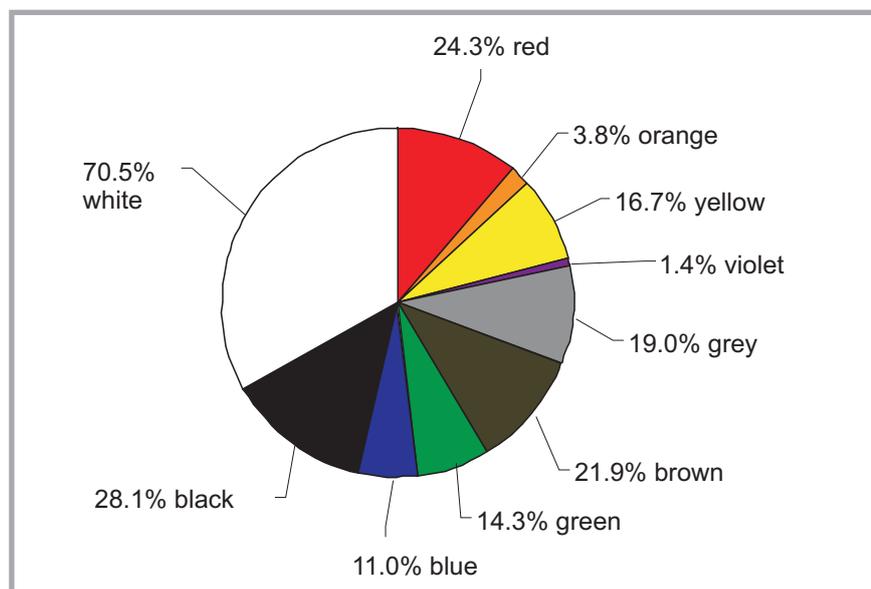
nia, ornamentation is named according to the number of threads used, namely cudweed combinations with harrows, circles, crosses, etc. In Lithuania the same form of two, three size element patterns has been woven by Lithuanians and weav-

ers of other nationalities. The quadrangle pattern motive such as cudweed, cross and harrow has been spreading in the ornamentation of the Baltic region and neighbouring countries. The Lithuanian weavers have also influenced neighbouring European countries. Furthermore the ornamentation forms that cross the borders acquire local features [6]. Our data showed that there are no the substantial differences in the weaving technique, and fabric patterns and colours concerning the regions which are known as more multicultural areas. Moreover weavers or presenters did not identify the peculiarities of their textile crafts and articles with a nationality.

The overshoot fabrics investigated are very original in their colouring. **Figure 14** presents the distribution of the frequency of colours of the fabrics investigated. Generalisation of the colours being used to decorate overshoot fabrics showed what kind of colours weavers of North and East Lithuania preferred to use. It was found that white colour yarns are in common use for such fabrics (70.5%). Additionally the study showed that the next most common are black, red, brown, grey, yellow, green, and blue colours. Meanwhile, orange and violet are rare colours in overshoot fabrics. It is worth noting that many overshoot fabrics studied in [8], have natural grey and white colours. Moreover these authors, investigating 290 Lithuanian traditional fabrics that originated from different ethnic regions of Lithuania and stored as exhibits in the National M. K. Čiurlionis

Art Museum, found that the largw part of overshoot fabrics have Lithuanian flag colours – red (24.48%), green (18.28%) and yellow (12.41%). So the total amount of these colours makes up 55.17%. Amazingly our investigations coincide with this fact fully (55.3%).

The usage of colours is related to the fabric's purpose. Moreover the functionality, maintenance and effect of decoration play important role here. The interaction of raw material with yarns and colours is also very significant. The most colourful fabrics - *dimai* - are applied as bed spreads and horsecloth/body cloth. For example, sharp and dark coloured wool patterning yarns are mainly used to weave bed spreads and horsecloth because they are used in daily life, hence they should not show dirt too much. Researches in [10] found that whereas combinations of 2 - 11 colours are used for Lithuanian folk checked skirts patterns, the most popular are combinations of 2 - 5 colours and two-colour of white-blue and white-black.. Furthermore motley fabrics with a surface pattern made from a few dominant motifs of fancy patterns in different colours were found to be rare when investigating Lithuanian folk skirts. We found that monochrome and combinations of 2 - 6 colours are used for the fabrics investigated. The most popular are combinations of 2 colours – 90.0%; other combinations are rare: 4 colours – 3.8%, and up to 6 colours – from 0.5 to 2.4%. Two-colour combinations of white-brown (21.7%), white-grey (20.2%), black-yellow (10.7%), black-red (7.5%), white-blue (6.8%), white-red (6.3%), black-white (4.8%), and white-green (4.8%) are mostly used; various other combinations are rare and come to 17.2%. It is worthy to state that the colours of overshoot fabrics investigated have a functional meaning, but dark red, dark green, and bright yellow colours are preferred by weavers because of their splendid appearance and value, being of the master and all the family. It was found that fabrics with uncoloured yarns comprised 33.8% of all samples investigated, while dyed and dyed-uncolored yarns are used in 33.8% and 32.4% of fabrics, respectively. Fabrics of two colours with white (64.0%), black (24.9%), yellow (4.8%), and red (3.6%) yarns, respectively, for ground warp and ground weft dominate, whereas other colours (grey, blue, green) are rare. Meanwhile for the patterning wefts brown (22.8%), grey (19.5%), red (15.9%), yellow (12.2%), blue (8.5%), and green



**Figure 14.** Distribution of frequency of colours of overshoot fabrics investigated.

(7.9%) colours are in common use, while others (white, black, orange, and violet) comprise only 0.5 - 5.3%.

## ■ Conclusions

Analysis of 210 overshot fabrics collected from rural territories of North and East Lithuania can be summarised by these conclusions:

- The results of chronological research show that overshot fabrics - *dimai* - were popular at different periods of the 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The economic factor also played a role here: homemade textiles began to be replaced by manufactured ones, which firstly appeared in the cities. Nevertheless the deep traditions of textile works served for Lithuanian village women to create homemade fabrics and hand them down from generation to generation as a part of their heritage and dowry. 20.0% of fabrics investigated the masters attributed to the period of 1971-1980. The other samples also make up large quantities: 13.8-14.3 (for each decade of 1961-2000). Their quantity decreased only a little bit at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: 12.4%. The oldest example, dated in ~1863 (bed spread/table cover), and the latest ones are made recently. Weaving with 4 harnesses is the most popular because of the simplicity of the technique and sufficient possibilities to reveal the creativity of the master. 72.4% of the fabrics investigated are made using such a way of weaving, whereas a 8 harness loom is used for 20.0% of articles. Because of the complexity of weaving, only a small amount of fabrics are woven using more harnesses. The weavers themselves used to create patterns or they repeated them in their own way. The structure of the fabric's ornamentation depends on the weaving technique and combination of motives on the whole textile.
- It was determined that linen, wool, cotton and chemical (manufactured) fibres are the most important for clothing and household overshot fabrics; other materials: hemp yarns and blended yarns from wool/chemical fibres are used more rarely. A combination of two fibrous components comprises the biggest part – 99.5%. It is a simple matter to develop new structural effects of the fabric employ-

ing only the originalities of the raw material. Articles made from pure fibres are rare because it is not a proper way to create much diversity.

- Most of fabrics investigated are described as bed spreads (66.2%) and towels (15.7%), depending on the great practical value of such textile. Other applications are as table covers, cloth for a lay-out place, horsecloth/body cloth, in folk costume, and as curtain material, or as double usage, i.e. bed spread/table cover. Many weavers or presenters used to prescribe a symbolic meaning to the textiles that were given as the gifts at significant family events like weddings and christenings or were employed in funeral rituals.
- White colour yarns are greatly favoured for overshot fabrics; also very common are yarns coloured black, red, brown, grey, yellow, green, and blue. While orange and violet colours are used more seldom. The monochrome and compositions of 2-6 colours are used for the fabrics investigated. In the main part of overshot fabrics, the ground and patterns are contrasting design items, which is why the most popular are combinations of 2 colours (90.0%). Among the various textile colour symbols the so-called Lithuanian colours of the Lithuanian flag or similar ones are well known. Present day textiles are mostly bright-coloured.
- In two-colour fabrics, combinations white-brown, white-grey, black-yellow, black-red, white-blue, white-red, black-white, and white-green are the most popular. Besides this white, black, yellow, and red yarns for the ground warp and ground weft dominate here, whereas for the pattering wefts brown, grey, red, yellow, blue, and green colours are a great favourite of weavers.

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