

The language that textiles speak

Throughout history, humans have woven stories into their fabrics. In this resource we will explore how textiles can tell stories about individuals, groups, cultures and events in time.

“Cloth is a language through which a people can tell stories about themselves, their community, and their place in the universe.” Eric Mindling (2016) in *Oaxaca Stories in Cloth*

Discussion point:

Are you familiar with any national, cultural or ethnic textiles or fabrics? Do you know anything about their significance? Do any textiles have particular significance to you and/or your cultural heritage?



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Throughout history there have been many examples of storytelling through textiles. Can you think of any examples?

LANGUAGE TASK

Describe the scene below from the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts men staring at Halley's Comet and King Harold at Westminster.



Help Box Read more about [Halley's Comet: Collisions with history | Science Museum](#)

English	German	Spanish	French
There is/are	Es gibt	Hay	Il y a
People	Menchen	gente	des gens
They are watching	sie beobachten	están viendo	qui sont en train de regarder
stars	Sterne	las estrellas	des étoiles
comet	Komet	cometa	comète
King	König	el Rey	le Roi

CREATIVE TASK

Throughout history, comet sightings have been considered symbols of hope, destruction and change. In the box below, sketch a modern-day depiction of a comet sighting. What event would be the context? Who and what would you include in the scene? When you have finished your sketch, write a description of it in French, German or Spanish.



Now we will explore some examples of the stories that textiles tell around the Spanish-, French- and German-speaking world.

TEXTILES THAT TELL STORIES ABOUT HOW WE VIEW THE WORLD AROUND US

Jalq'a and Tarabuco textiles of Bolivia

You may know that the main language in Bolivia is Spanish due to its colonial past, but by looking at this map of Indigenous peoples of Bolivia, we begin to appreciate the diversity of language and culture within the country.

Native or Indigenous Bolivians constitute over 36 ethnic groups, including Aymara and Quechua (the largest).

The Indigenous people of Bolivia have been subjected to centuries of exploitation, marginalisation and lack of representation.

In recent decades, there has been a growth of political and social mobilisation to improve the conditions of Indigenous communities.

While Bolivia is internationally renowned for its beautiful textiles, the Jalq'a and Tarabuco textiles are considered some of the most stunning.



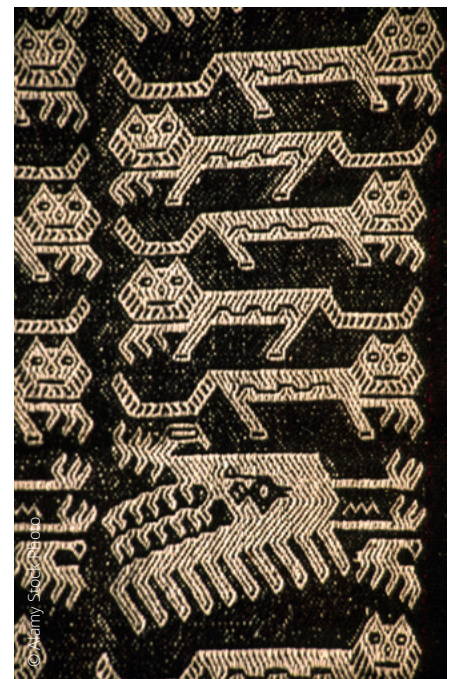
Tarabuco and Jalq'a textiles are made in the region east of Sucre.

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Quechua-speaking Jalq'a artists depict stories that reveal insights into their cosmic worldview of society and aspects of Andean identity. Many weavers work on a traditional-style indigenous loom as pictured below.



The examples of **Jalq'a** textiles below include depictions of *khurus* (wild animals), but others might depict mythical creatures. The weaving technique is highly skilled and it is used to reflect or to absorb the light, which adds dimension, texture and depth to the work. According to some interpretations of the textiles, the choice of colours represents a world of chaos, darkness, death and fear, and the focus on animals, with the occasional appearance of a person, depicts humans as lost beings in an animal kingdom.



Tarabuco textiles are made from sheep's wool that has been dyed in a wide variety of bright colours. The textiles frequently depict horses, condors, llamas, birds and other aspects of the natural landscape including flowers and rivers (depicted as zig zags).

What can you find in the examples of Tarabuco textiles below?

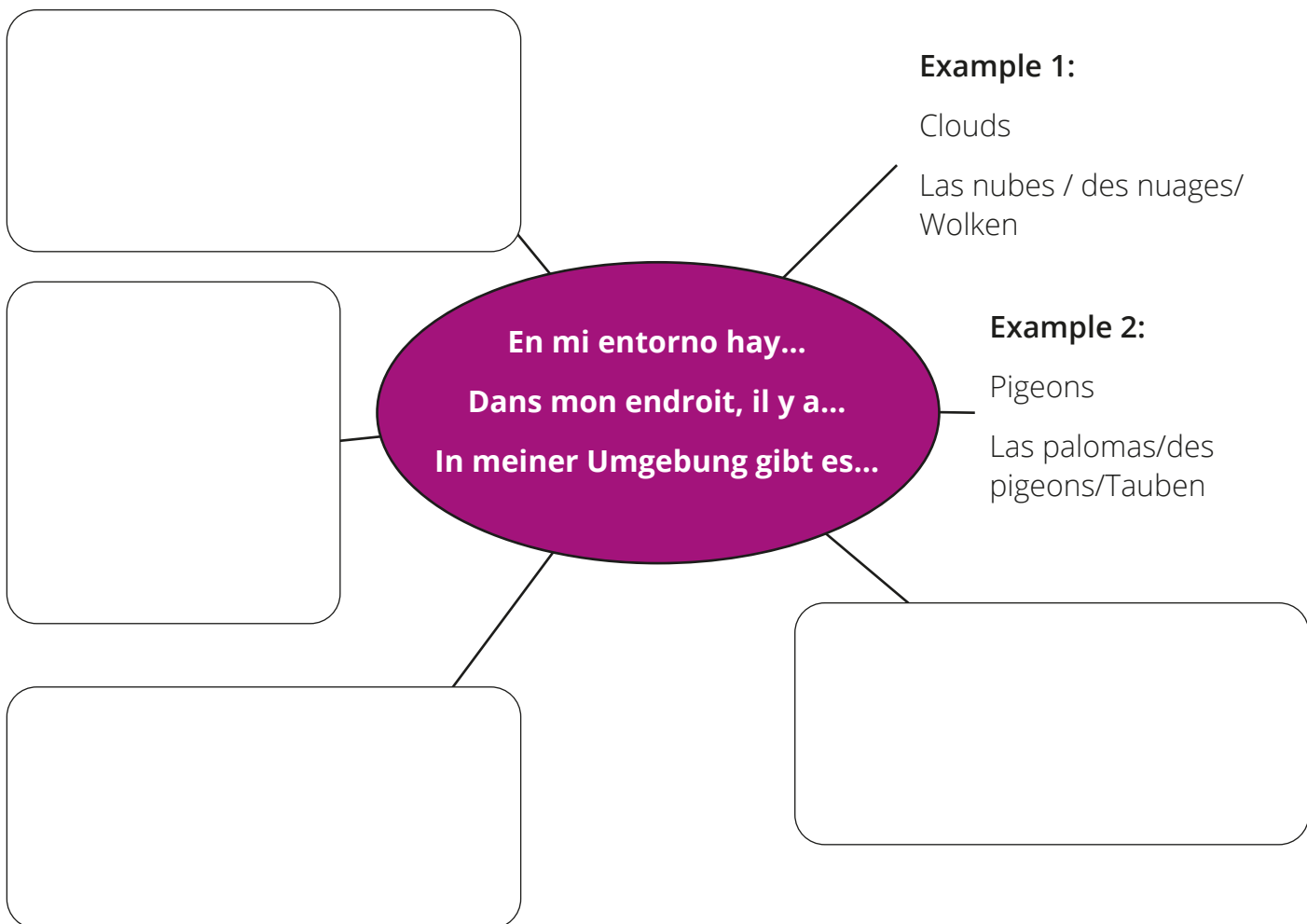


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LANGUAGE TASK

Which aspects of the natural world would feature in a textile depicting your surroundings?

Complete the spider diagram below with some key items of vocabulary in the language(s) that you are learning. For support, you can refer back to the Environmental justice resource (page 13) for vocabulary related to nature in the target languages.



During the Pujllay Festival, the Tarabuco textiles are showcased. *Pujllay* means 'play' or 'dance' in Quechua, and this is a tradition that commemorates the Battle of Cumbate in 1816 when the people of Tarabuco liberated their town from the Spanish colonisers. Festivalgoers express their gratitude and make offerings to Pachamama (Mother Earth).



RESEARCH TASK

Are you familiar with other independence celebrations or days in any other countries or for any other peoples?

Find out about some here: [List of Independence Days by Country - WorldAtlas](#) and [List of national independence days - Wikipedia](#)

TEXTILES THAT GIVE VOICE TO THE UNSPEAKABLE

Arpilleras of Chile

Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973–1990) was a period in Chilean history that was characterised by many human rights violations and forced disappearances. In Chile, people were not allowed to speak out against the regime and there was total state control over the media.

Arpilleras are brightly-coloured patchwork story tapestries. During the dictatorship of 17 years, groups of women (*arpilleristas*) made *arpilleras* to describe what was happening to them and to their families. The cloths depict scenes of violence, poverty and government repression. The *arpilleras* were smuggled out of the country and they represented a key aspect of resistance against the regime, which ended in 1990.

Purranque, Chile. November 13, 2021. Burlap made during the Pinochet dictatorship. The arpilleras are an expression of community crafts originated during the Chilean military dictatorship. They are embroideries made by groups of women (arpilleristas) who showed in their works, as a form of complaint, the search for their disappeared detained relatives and other social issues during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.



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Reflective point:

Read the quotation below from Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, speaking about his depiction of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War in his painting [Guernica](#).

“The purpose of painting is not to adorn apartments. It is an instrument of war to attack and defend against the enemy.” Picasso, 1945

What is your response to this? Are you aware of any other forms of art used as resistance or tell a story of struggle?

TEXTILES THAT UNITE

Bògòlanfini or *bogolan* cloth in Mali

While Mali's official language is French (a legacy of colonialism, like Spanish in Bolivia), there are many languages spoken in the country, reflecting the rich diversity of ethnicity and culture.



RESEARCH TASK

Find out about some of the languages that are spoken in Mali. Complete the speech bubbles below with the name of different languages spoken in the country.

Suggested reading: [Languages of Mali - Wikipedia](#)



The *Bògòlanfini* or *bogolan* cloth of the Bamana people of Mali is internationally renowned. It is a handcrafted cotton fabric that is stained or painted with fermented mud.

This cloth, rich in cultural significance, has become a symbol of Malian identity and is worn by Malians of all ethnicities.

The Groupe Bogolan Kasaobané is an artist collective which is concerned with addressing the large quantities of bogolanfini being mass-produced for the tourist and export markets. It aims to conserve traditional Malian painting methods and locally produced materials.



French speakers:
[Hear more about this collective.](#)

Bogolanfini has also become a symbol of Pan-African unity, a worldwide movement that aims to encourage and strengthen solidarity between all diasporas of African ancestry and Indigenous peoples.



Pan-African liberation flag

[Read more about African textile design and the diaspora.](#)



THE DEVASTATION THAT OUR TEXTILES SPEAK

Global fast fashion brands overproduce clothes at an alarming rate to meet the demands of consumers in the Global North. When we donate our clothes to charity shops, only a small percentage is resold or repurposed in the country in which it was donated. Huge quantities are exported for 'reuse' in East and West Africa and Eastern Europe. While this may be of benefit for countries in the Global North, this dumping of textile waste has devastating consequences for the local textile economy and environment of the countries to which the waste is sent and serious health implications for people who live there. [Read more on Greenpeace's website.](#)

'RETURN TO SENDER'

Bobby Kolade is a mixed-heritage German-Ugandan fashion designer who is concerned about the environmental impact on Uganda and the damage caused to the local textile economy by the mass exportation of textile waste to the country. Offended by the lack of dignity in finding clothes for resale that were torn and dirty in the clothing markets of Kampala, he launched a fashion label called 'Return to Sender.' The design team uses discarded second-hand clothes from the Global North and redesigns them, before redistributing them back to the Global North (where they were originally discarded before being shipped to Africa).



What is your response to this dynamic? What are some of the solutions to the problems caused by fast fashion and consumer habits in the Global North?

RESEARCH TASKS

Find out in which countries the following global fashion brands are based:

Zara, H&M, ASOS, UNIQLO, GAP, New Look, Next, Shein

Find out about some of the local, national and global responses to the fast fashion industry.

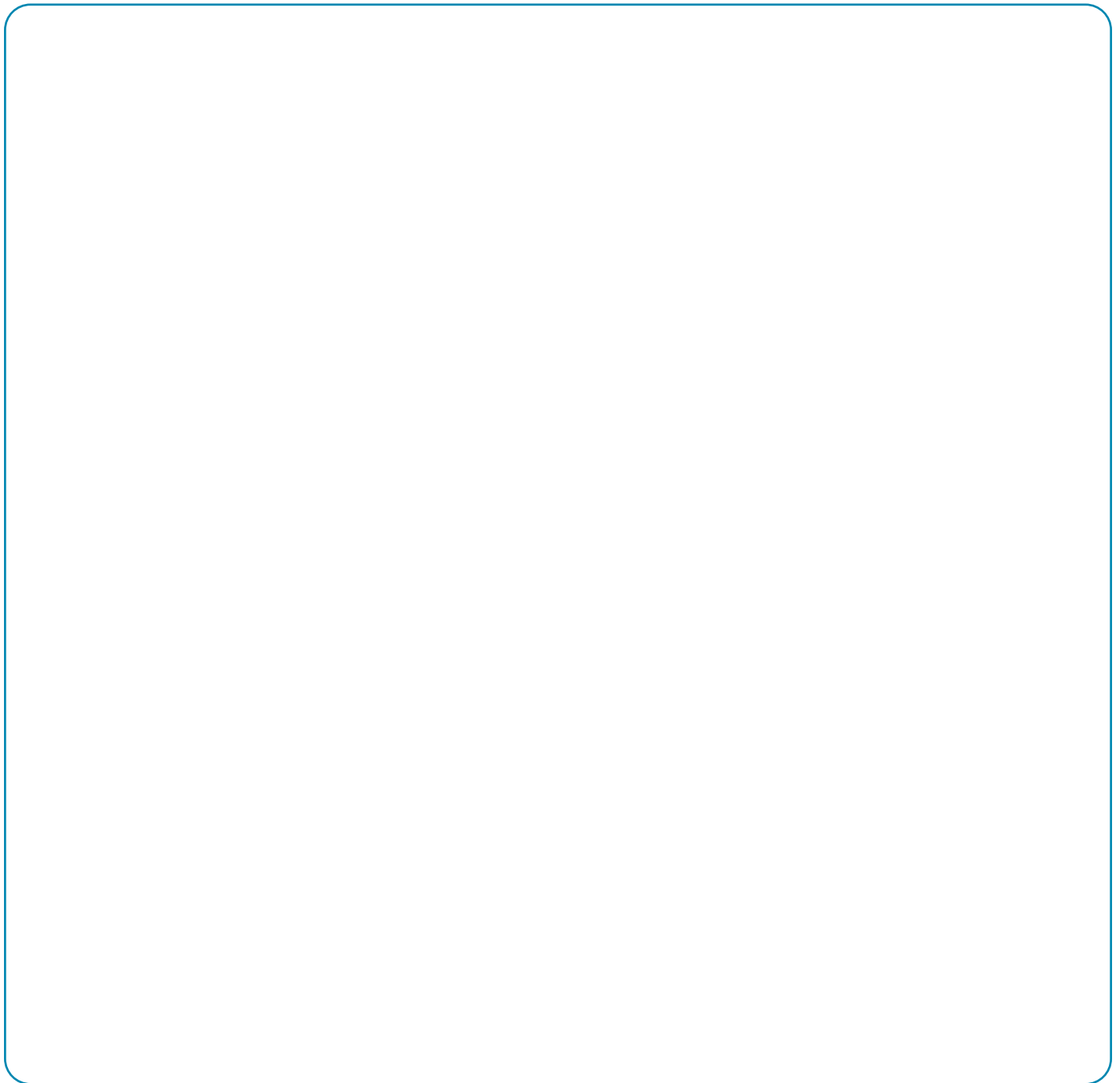


REFLECTIVE TASK

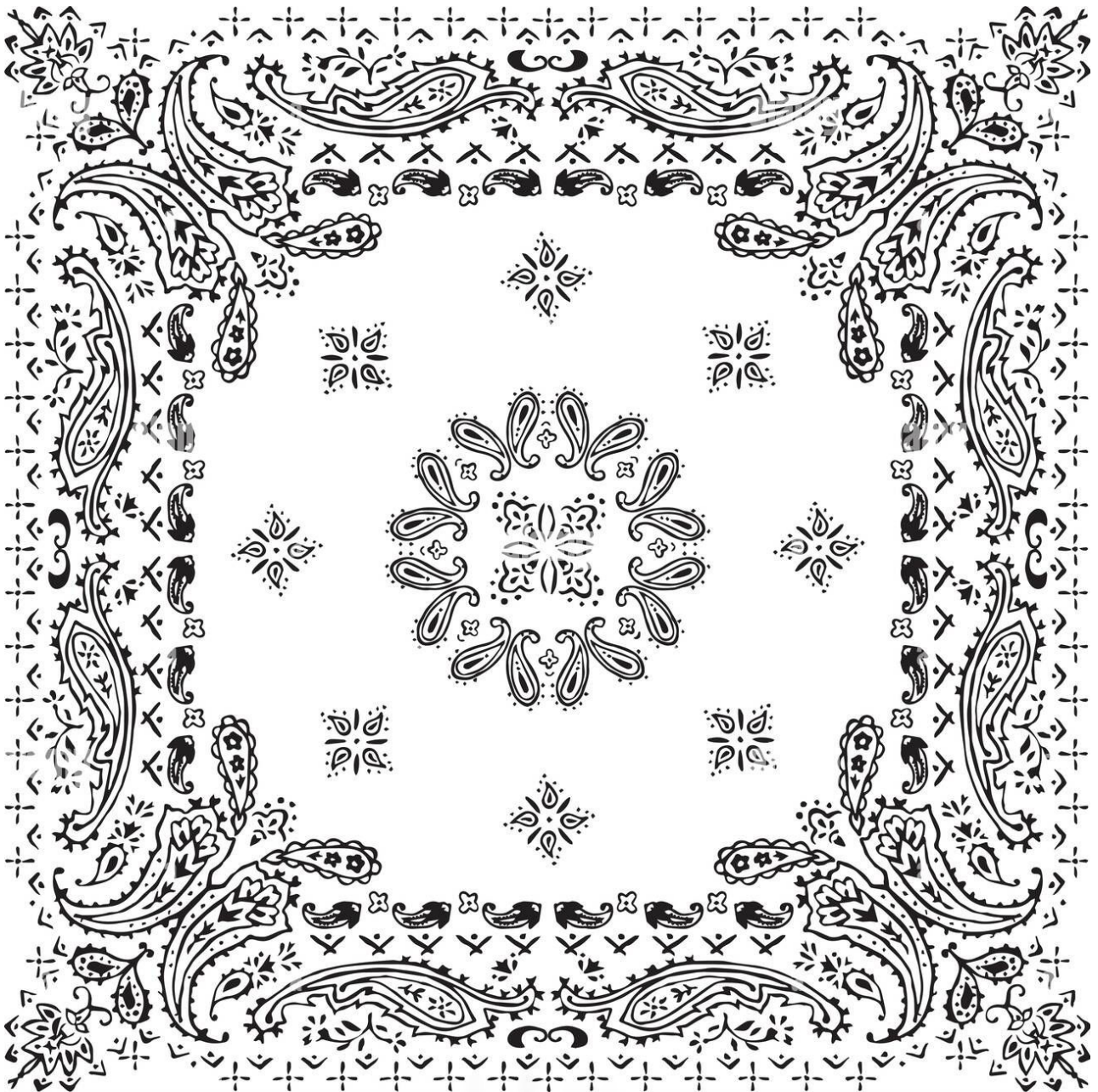
Which steps might be taken at a global, national, community and individual level to contribute to a fashion industry that is more sustainable and fairer?

CREATIVE TASKS

Use inspiration from the examples of textile design we have seen in this resource to create a piece which reflects a part of your own story or identity/identities. You might want to represent any single or multiple dimension(s) of your identity (e.g. ethnicity/race/sexuality/gender/disability). Your story is yours to tell through your art!



The pattern below is for you to colour in. A great way to promote mindfulness and your wellbeing!



FIND OUT MORE:

[Arpilleras: Chile's Women Weave Tapestries of Truth \(gendersecurityproject.com\)](https://gendersecurityproject.com)

Cereceda, V (2020) [The souls of the dead: images woven in women's clothing of the Jalq'a cultural area \(south-central Bolivia\)](https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/) Published in *Hidden Stories/Human Lives: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America 17th Biennial Symposium, October 15-17, 2020*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/>

Doak, C (2022) *Conflict in Eds Duncan, D & Burns, J in Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*. Liverpool University Press

Greenpeace website [How Fast Fashion is using the Global South as a dumping ground for textile waste - Greenpeace International](https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-releases/2022/how-fast-fashion-is-using-the-global-south-as-a-dumping-ground-for-textile-waste)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Panford is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary's University in Twickenham, with over 14 years' experience teaching languages in secondary schools in London. She has studied and worked in Spain and Peru. Lisa is passionate about counteracting discriminatory practices in the secondary MFL classroom and is dedicated to the principle that all pupils should be given an opportunity to appreciate the enriching and transformative experience of studying languages. Lisa is the co-founder of the Decolonising Secondary MFL Curriculum (Decolonising the Curriculum - Association for Language Learning (all-languages.org.uk)), elected Member of the Council for the Association for Language Learning and a Member of the Advisory Panels at the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies and the British Academy.

Explore the rest of our resources on [diversity and inclusion](#).

