

Jella Fink

VOICES OF WEAVERS

Textile Cultures, Craftsmanship, and
Identity in Contemporary Myanmar

WAXMANN

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A Note on the Text

The transcription of Burmese terms to Roman script follows the most commonly used forms.

Names of persons and locations are noted in Roman script. In Myanmar, names are not differentiated into first name and family name. Instead, each person has an individual name. Persons and authors from Myanmar are referenced accordingly.

Names of informants have been pseudonymized to ensure their safety and well-being. Exempt are deceased and those who are present in public life.

All photographs have been taken by the author and permission of the pictured individuals has been obtained.

Introductory Remarks

This study looks at textile cultures, craftsmanship, and identity and their relationship to political and economic developments of contemporary Myanmar.

Several aspects have sparked this research interest. Amongst them, the complex history of Myanmar and a culturally diverse population certainly are main factors. Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country with a population of around fifty-five million. It is home to over one hundred distinct ethnic groups of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.¹ Geographically vast, the country covers several climate zones from the foothills of the Himalayas in the North to the tropical islands in the South. With a history of changing political systems and human migration flows over centuries, the complexity of Myanmar has been amplified.

Another aspect is the past seclusion of Myanmar, which has been mostly isolated since the 1960s. This led to the country being understudied and underrepresented in public discourses. From a cultural anthropological perspective, fieldwork could not be conducted during these times. As a result, much of the referenced materials are from the first half of the 20th century. This situation has fundamentally changed with the 2007 initiated top-down democratization process. More specifically, the first free elections in 2015 were an ultimate alteration to the overall situation and made fieldwork a realistic prospect again. In summary, the lack of academic fundament was cause for motivation to conduct this study as much as it was for some despair along the way.

An early interest in the field of material culture guided my attention towards craft manufacturing as an area, which is shaped by individual agency and cultural characteristics. While material culture studies have looked at commodities and consumption extensively, the makers of handicrafts were rarely covered. Therefore, studying textile material cultures from the perspectives of weavers in Myanmar forms an ideal research subject.

The research was designed to inform about weavers, their living situation, the textile crafts, and the role their making played for the groups' identity. Finally, exploring the potential of textiles as an alternative source of knowledge in light of the lack of research affirmed my decision to study textile material culture in Myanmar. An analysis of the capacity of textile to represent cultural memories while incorporating change has become a central research question.

1 'Ethnic groups' is believed to be the most neutral term with regards to describing a group identity to which its members ascribe based on characteristics such as language, shared history, land of origin, etc., or an accumulation of these. The author understands self-ascription as the determining factor. However, the following chapter will show that within Myanmar, the determining factors are derived considerably differently. For the benefit of a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Myanmar, emic concepts will be presented in detail in chapter 2, p. 36.

Those aspects, which sparked the initial research interest, have over time grown into a body that includes national narratives, suppression, creation, freedom, the economy, and gender issues. The analysis of these topics in Myanmar as a post-colonial and multi-ethnic nation-state will decisively increase the academic understanding of the specific contemporary situation.

The fieldwork data was collected from 2014 to 2017. The study presents two cases in order to take into account the fundamental differences in geography, infrastructure and ethnic belonging in Myanmar's vast landscape. The first case study focuses on weavers of the *Lun't-aya Acheik* tapestry in the Amarapura and Sagaing area. The second case study is about weavers and textile artisans in and around Kengtung. The goal is to illustrate the various ways of life and the meaning of textile culture within them while creating empiric material for comprehensible outlooks on the research questions. Amarapura and Sagaing represent former royal capitals with a long history of hand-weaving in the form of an elaborate tapestry weave. The Kengtung area lies along the country's periphery and is characterized as a particularly ethnically diverse area. Hand-weaving is categorized as a female practice in all the researched communities so that it predetermined a gender focus. The presented cases will thus allow for a better understanding of the social, economic and cultural roles of women in different regions of contemporary Myanmar.

As noted earlier, the seclusion of Myanmar, beginning in the 1960s, has restrained research in various disciplines (Brac de la Perrière 2009, p. 191 ff.) and resulted in an inadequate historical and contemporary research base. Within the limited resources, historical perspectives prevail, and details on different textile cultures in Myanmar remain scarce. Beginning the research endeavor with enthusiasm to fill some of the academic knowledge gaps on Myanmar and to add to the academic debate, I soon learned that these aspects generate not only interesting research niches but also require much time and effort to be compiled into an informed framework. As a result, marginal notes and practical information are included in the study, which hopefully increases the available knowledge base for fellow researchers beyond the specific focus on textile cultures.

The relevant theoretical and empirical debates accompanying the topic of textiles and textile creation are rooted in the cultural anthropological field of material culture. The field itself has gone through complex changes within the discipline and has recently grown in importance. Material culture again finds increasing research interest to come to meaningful conclusions about individuals, societies, and cultures such as presented in the works of anthropologist Daniel Miller. Within it, aspects of consumption dominate the discussions but questions regarding artisans receive little attention. Chapter 1 will elaborate on these aspects and show in more detail how the study aims to fill research gaps on the manufacturing aspects of objects. Studies on textile creation in other Asian countries, like Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia were also looked at since studies focusing on Myanmar remain disparate in character and method and are mostly outdated (Howard 2005; Dell & Dudley 2003).

The central research questions, thus, will look at the role of textiles from local perspectives. The study strives to a further understanding of the social and economic inter-

weavements in the transforming nation of Myanmar as well. Recent literature on the political and economic changes will note critical aspects of identity and nationally promoted narratives to come to a deeper understanding of the emic perspectives and debates. The field data then will be informed by the self-understanding of individuals and ethnic groups. Particularly, the case study of the Kengtung region looks at textile manufacturing and its role within demarcation processes. Some scholars have taken the stance that not seclusion is fundamental to the constitution of a society but, instead, it is the negotiation of oneself in the light of another (Leach 1977, Sprenger 2013, p. 315). With this critical aspect in mind, this study aims to discover these negotiations and their material forms in the case of Myanmar. It will also look at the increasing permeability of the borders while the historical overview will also make clear that goods and ideas have always been flowing back and forth across the borders, even if to a smaller extent in the past than it is the case today. Following this line of thinking, hand-weaving and related textile practices are believed to offer insights into decision-making and negotiation processes. In more specific terms, hand-weaving allows for varieties in patterns, colors and cloth size while it is always based on the same principle of connecting single threads to an entity. In that regard, textiles are a canvas of underlying considerations.

The initially mentioned recent political and economic changes of Myanmar require a re-invention of the nation and its narratives. Therefore, local debates have been included and are set into relation with the relevant academic debates such as with historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith (Smith 1996). With regards to comparative examples, it is drawn from research conducted in Uzbekistan as a post-Soviet nation-state within a nation-building process (Mentges 2017a).

Finally, the international debate on cultural heritage opens up in further considerations. On the one hand, this study looks into the universality of the concept of cultural heritage and scrutinizes in how far it holds relevance for a Southeast Asian context, beyond its origin in European schools of thought (c.f. Robinson 2011, p. 217 f.). The field thus shall be expanded to include perspectives from Myanmar as examples for Asian thoughts on cultural heritage. More specifically, the goal is to come to terms with cultural heritage in a multi-ethnic state where questions of belonging and marginalization pose essential aspects of negotiations. On the other hand, the study will look at the perceptions of textiles and their making as a cultural heritage from a local perspective. The current transformative situation may hold additional insights into existing disruptions and continuities. With these questions in mind, textile manufacturing techniques and processes will be explored. Furthermore, knowledge transfer and related socio-cultural practices are part of this elaboration.

Since women conduct large parts of the textile production, the study will particularly look at the positions of women within the society and their agency. Particularly the case examples from Kengtung hold the potential to inform of the changing roles of women concerning material culture and the influence of tourism as an increasingly relevant external factor.

This book is organized into five main chapters. The first chapter lays out the general context and begins with the international material culture discourse before going into the details of the textile material cultures of Myanmar. The chapter ends with an overview of the research design as a whole and of the employed methods. The second chapter will look at the history of Myanmar from the past to present in more detail. This review lays out the specifics of the post-colonial state and outlines the current transformation process. It will also offer analyses of ‘belonging,’ ‘belief,’ and ‘memory,’ which are three central topoi that dominate the local contemporary discourse and are believed to be essential to an in-depth understanding of Myanmar society today.

The next two chapters are ethnographic studies with a focus on hand-weaving in contemporary Myanmar. The first case study, based in Amarapura and Sagaing, looks at life as a weaver in economic and social terms as well as the technical details of hand-weaving in the region and its strong linkages to the majority ethnic group in Myanmar. The focus lies with the weavers, who create a sophisticated tapestry weave produced only in this location. It points to textile knowledge and its handling as crucial aspects and directs attention to the tensions between tapestry weave as an art form and as a commodity with substantial cultural implications.

The second case study sets out to engage with other ethnic groups and their textile cultures to complement the data for a multi-dimensional perspective on Myanmar. Several different groups live in and around Kengtung in Eastern Shan State and possess particular techniques that differ from each other. The relationship between textile production and ethnic belonging is evident in these cases, but the underlying processes remain understudied. Again, due to the fragmented existing data, broader information about ethnic groups of the area has been included for a holistic perspective and to contribute to future research endeavors. That is why further textile manufacturing practices beyond hand-weaving are included.

Since both cases are embedded within highly varying contexts in terms of geography, history, and textile practice, each case study will end with a separate conclusion. However, with regards to their potential in complementing a broader perspective on Myanmar’s textile cultures and their makers, the essential concepts will be evaluated in the final chapter as a conclusion.

1 Material Matters – Locating the Textile Cultures of Myanmar

Textile Culture and the International Material Culture Discourse

As pointed out in the introduction, this work aims to describe and to examine the material dimension of change as one arena of on-going negotiations of belonging, belief, and memory in a post-colonial and multi-ethnic nation-state. The following sections will draw a general overview of material culture studies in the past and present, upon which first reflections on the specifics of textile material culture and its studies will be based. The second section of this chapter will then elaborate upon the discourse of the textile material culture of Myanmar and give further guidance to conceptualizing thoughts and questions surrounding it. The goal of this work is to explain and come to a better understanding of the specifics of the material and immaterial dimensions of change with a specific focus on textile culture. Thus, it will refer to those benchmarks of disciplinary development and works, which are most influential to this study. However, it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss the general nature of the current discourse of cultural anthropological studies of material culture in all its facets.

While material culture has faced certain neglect during the 20th century, it has been rediscovered for cultural anthropology in the mid-1980s, when several works by different scholars have led to a paradigm shift, which is terminologically coined as the ‘material turn’. It can be dated to the same time as the emergence of another paradigm shift that goes beyond the discipline of cultural anthropology, that of ‘globalization’. With regards to contents, these theoretical reconstitutions of worldviews form along the same baseline: an understanding which acknowledges the interrelatedness of the world in material and immaterial terms. Within the discipline of cultural anthropology, material culture has again grown into a vital examination field.

However, a specific focus has become evident. Particularly, material consumption as an international – globalized – phenomenon has become central. It is characterized by the dichotomy of production and consumption, which by this time was considered as the new standard in most parts of the world. Examining this occurrence in its bandwidth, “The Social Life of Things” (1986) by Arjun Appadurai is widely acknowledged as one of the most original works, laying the foundation of the contemporary material culture debate. In a similar vein, Daniel Miller offers in his studies of contemporary global material cultures an approach within which commodities and consumption of all societies are accommodated to be examined. It is his understanding that the discipline’s “ideological blind spot” (Miller 1995, p. 143), seeing commodities as something dissocial, is corrected by the material turn (ibid.). It is also during this time that the term ‘globalization’ is being used to conceptually grasp a post-modern world, in which machine-enabled communication and mobility through time and space have reached a new magnitude. People, ideas, and things move and are moved around which connects the world at unprecedented rates and ways. Together with Appadurai and others, Miller has shaped the present-day studies of material culture (see, e.g., Miller 1983, Miller 1995, Miller 2010 and Banerjee & Miller 2003).

After the study of things receded behind the methodological sensations of the early 20th century and their advancements, such as the participant observation and audio-visual documentation facilitated by technological progress, it now had returned to the core of the studies of human cultures again. However, this return to material culture challenges the alignment of production cultures and consumption cultures and has led to a growing rift between the respective studies. The dominant school of thought within textile material culture studies is concerned with the phenomena surrounding consumption. This includes the body of works by Miller and aligned scholars (Küchler & Miller 2005, Banerjee & Miller 2003). Also, representatives of Fashion Studies refer to textile culture primarily in terms of dress in a post-globalized international arena (Allman 2004, Rovine 2004; for the term “post-globalization” see de Bruijn & van Dijk 2012, p. 4 f.). As such, the discussion remains dominated by an understanding of things as commodities in worlds where production and consumption are separated.

Even though this is not a typical feature of textile material culture in all countries of the world, it nonetheless brought the importance of garments back to the attention of Western² scholars. Dress and textiles hold a specific role. It is their proximity to the human body, which grants them a unique role apart from other categories of objects (Mentges 2005, pp. 21 f.; Weiner & Schneider 1989). As a result, some of Miller’s ideas are valid for discussion of dress, while some bear irrelevance when speaking of societies where production and consumption occur less separately; and for cultures in which the concept of materialism differs from Western notions, which closely link material things to superficiality and a loss of depth (Miller 2010, p. 22). Based on this Western philosophical thought, Mentges also points to two dimensions for the analysis of dress, namely the ‘concrete-material’ and the ‘spiritual-symbolic’ (Mentges 2005, pp. 21 f.). Fundamental to these understandings is the Western philosophical concept of a body-soul-dualism, which finds continuation in the material-immaterial-dichotomy raised here. From the perspective of Eastern philosophical discourse, these dualisms are not prominent. In Myanmar, a country characterized mainly by the devotion to Buddhist thought and belief, the differentiation between body and soul, and the material and immaterial, occurs along different lines. It is, therefore, one goal of this study to not only acknowledge this conceptual difference but also to inform the international discourse on dress and textiles from the Myanmar perspective.

Furthermore, it has been a result of these focused perspectives that producers and production remain understudied (see also Mentges 2005, p. 20). Discourses focus on demand and related issues such as appropriation and have recently grown to include the “Social Life of Things” (Appadurai 1986) and ideas related to objects behaving in unforeseen own ways, for which German cultural anthropologist Hans Peter Hahn coined

2 The “West” is a widely employed term to refer to Europe, North America and Australia. It is rooted in early world divisions according to belief systems and denominates the Occident. The “West” and “Westerners” will be used accordingly throughout this work, whereas the detailed etymology and history of the terms must be discussed elsewhere. Further, it must be noted that these terms are also used in local discussions in Myanmar.

the term “Eigensinn” [English: ‘obstinacy’] (Hahn 2015). Only a few scholars have set their focus on the lives of the makers and their influences throughout the textile production process. Amongst these are A. Weiner & J. Schneider (1989), J. Eicher (1995), and E. Tarlo (1996), which have lent important orientation to this study. So, this research aims to provide empiric data and analytic insights for the international discourse on textile material culture. Furthermore, the role of textiles and design will be questioned in terms of their part in identity-creating processes and as markers of gender and social group (see Niessen, Leshkovich & Jones 2003; Kuchler and Miller 2005; Skov 2011), as well as in light of the importance of ethnic belonging in post-colonial contexts (Hahn 2014). In order to do so, the agencies of protagonists and their analysis will form a guiding thought throughout the work and include historiography, spatialization, interaction and innovations as crucial aspects of textile culture (see also Tarlo 1996, Clarke 2011). S. Kuchler and G. Were describe historiography and spatialization as particularly significant aspects for the translation of textiles’ non-material legacy and “Dingtransformation” [English: ‘transformation of things’] (Kuchler & Were 2005, XXII) as being “intimately bound up with the way retrospective thought invests the future with the past” (ibid.). And although textile material culture studies often include a retrospective, this outlook points to the immaterial dimensions of textiles, their time-transcending qualities and allow for a more flexible understanding of the material beyond static properties while promoting their connecting role between the past and the future.

It is also important to note that such “non-material legacies” should not be understood as ‘knowledge archives’ – as portable and separate units – but rather as points of orientation for members of a cultural group, who enliven cultural processes based on such cultural knowledge and under inclusion of their agency. These components are also essential prerequisites for the development of a cultural heritage. As pointed out earlier, demand and consumption hold a more prominent role within the textile material culture studies. Weiner & Schneider decisively advanced the perspective to include textile manufacturing as a practical generation and cultural interpretation of textile cultural heritages with their volume “Cloth and Human Experience” (1989).

Nonetheless, within the contemporary Asian context, the term “cultural heritage” has received little attention with the exception of the article by Vietnamese philosopher N. Trong Chuan “The Cultural Heritage of Vietnam and Modern Changes” (2005). Case studies of textile cultures from Myanmar can support the debate on cultural heritage as informed of Asian perspectives. Furthermore, the transformative processes within the multi-ethnic state Myanmar form an interesting research field of negotiations of identity and cultural heritage (c.f. Gillow 1999, p. 13, Miller 2010, p. 40). Drawing upon these ideas, the central points of this research are concerned with forms of knowledge transfer and the exploration of connections between the profession of the weavers and their life histories. Further, the homogenization processes of textile practices form an integral part for identity-creation and manifestation, which are conceptually grasped by the concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and believed to be particularly