

Cultural Symbols and Textile Communication:
The Documentation of a Woven Symbolic Textile

Introduction

I am a weaver. With this perspective I study cultural symbols applied to hand woven cloth through pre-woven dye processes, structure, purpose of production and use. Textiles and fiber arts have long-lived in the general mindset as craft. By studying the cultural importance of textiles as symbolic utilitarian and ritual objects cross-culturally, textiles can be appreciated for their realistic and abstract communicative qualities, as other art forms are understood as expressing. Entering the conversation of textile research as a weaver offers an informed perspective of the emotional dedication as well as the mental, physical and creative requirements and limitations of the weaving process (Silverman, 1982). This project's goal was to produce a culturally symbolic textile combining studio practice and literature pertaining to the cultural expressiveness of textiles supported by process documentation and personal reflection. The following writing is a combination of literature research, participant observation in Flores, Indonesia from 2007-2008 and applied knowledge through the production of a textile utilizing the communicative abilities of textiles through imbedded cultural symbols.

Cultural meaning is expressed in textiles through color, motif, the process of weaving (the handling and counting of threads, threading the loom, weaving the cloth, cutting the cloth from the loom) and the temporality of the cloth as it deteriorates through use (Chalmers, 1998, Davis, 1997, Feminias, Medlin & Meisch, 1987; Heckman, 2003; Meisch, 1997; Sullivan, 1982; Tedlock, 1985; Wilson, 1996). The symbolism, which is developed by the culture over time, is one example of visual storytelling. Being a vehicle communicating folklore, cultural belief, history, politics, status, kinship and other messages, textiles communicate a culturally understood visual language. This type of symbolic communication is part of a broader happening of creative symbolism through abstraction, such as painting and poetry, as well as the culturally specific symbolic communication of dress (Cheesman, 2007; Connors, 1996; Heckman, 2003; Hoskins, 1989; Jung, 1968). Weaving communities are both recording and reacting to the culturally learned language of creative symbolism within the medium of cloth and their creative agency as designer, weaver, finisher and owner (Davis, 1997; Feminias et al., 1987). These textiles are utilitarian objects as garments for everyday use and ritual objects with great cultural importance.

Speaking about textiles generally as symbolic objects is possible, as art holds creative space cross-culturally. Speaking to specific communication of textile symbols in a homogenous way enters the thinking that one culture's symbols should be understood by another, which is a perspective many anthropologists have been working hard to leave behind (Feminias, 1987; Graburn, 1976; Russell, 2007). Looking at textiles as expressing a universal message undermines the intricacies and diversity of culture and cultural expression (Castñeda, 2008; Parker, 2007). Textiles across many cultures are objects imbued with meaning. Because of the importance within folklore, kinship and ritual, textiles gain their own agency, not only having power placed upon them through ritual, but holding power through repeated use, motif and color (Schneider, 1987; Hoskins, 1989).

“Although they [textiles] had ritual significance for less blood thirsty concerns such as fertility, in which they were used to create large enclosures, their prime role was connected with the head-hunting deemed necessary to re-establish the correct cosmic order, thus ensuring fertility. To this end Iban head-hunters would first prepare for a raiding party by sleeping under a charged cloth for power” (Gillow, 1992, p. 6).

With these topics as the underlying context to the weaving project, I come to textiles as a weaver from a privileged culture where there is time to be an artist for profession. This privilege shows itself though the importance placed on abundance, newness and the status this communicates. I come to this project to further develop understanding of myself as a white woman of Chicago. I come to this project with my heritage and personal experiences of adapting, accepting and rejecting what it means to be a woman in the world, my community, as an artist, as a weaver, as an educator and more. Art has the power to express and challenge cultural norms through both realistic and symbolic expression (Jung, 1968). Historic and contemporary textiles communicate the continuous changing of tradition through the manipulation of the limitations of woven cloth as the medium (Hatcher, 1985; Schneider, 1987).

Documentation and Process Entries

Below are process images and a journal documenting the creation of a weaving with an introduction to the conceptual framework. As a collection of thoughts, documentation and reflection of the process of creating a symbolic textile, the text below is separated by dates to

document the progression of time in relation to work. This reflection was then reworked, placing sources into the text to support the design and concept of the project.

1/03/12: The development of the concept

In developing how to communicate my culture through a woven textile, I thought back to literature pertaining to the cultural importance of textiles and the communicative nature of the arts as well as my experience in Indonesia as a participant observer with female weavers. The iconography placed in textiles through the dying and weaving process can become a learned non-alphabetical language, according to Silverman (2008) “like writing, Q’ero cloth creates a permanent record in the form of woven cloth that is decorated with geometric motifs and colors.” Later, Silverman (2008) goes on to explain that within Q’ero textiles “iconography functions as pictographic writing” and evolves, not only as a “language of metaphor,” but Q’ero pictograph writing and textile motif responded to one another in aesthetic, meaning and sentence structure. With knowledge of textiles as a form of communication, I began to ask questions to build the concept of my weaving.

I had to first determine what my “culture” is. I thought about my race and gender, as a white woman with Polish, Italian and German heritage. In recognition of the historical and contemporary connection of femininity and cloth, my gender plays a role in my perspective of working with thread and textiles (Sullivan, 1982; Gavin, 1996). This culturally learned view of textiles and topics of gender enters this project through symbolic gestures of color and mass.

“Most of the fine textiles of Indonesia have been produced by women. The men undertake some workshop and factory production, and make textile tools, such as metal stamps or wooden looms, but all the steps in the creation of cloth, from the preparation of the ground, the planting of the cotton and the gathering of the dye-plants to the final weaving of the patterned fabric, are traditionally exclusively undertaken by women” (Gillow, 1992, p. 15).

My heritage does not have as much input in my daily understanding of my surroundings as being a creative thinker informs my perspective of my role in society. My culture as an artist in Chicago, as an arts educator and as a weaver brings me into liberal-thinking spaces. During this reflective process, I realized that the action of identifying and analyzing my culture is a very privileged

position to claim and I was moving this project from the communication of given symbols from my culture to a commentary of my culture, which was not the goal of this project.

I then proceeded to create symbols to express what I wanted to comment on about my culture. Looking at elements of prescribed femininity, politics, societal pressure of life stages and how these topics can be represented in iconography and color utilizing culturally learned and intrinsic associations. Such as red representing a holiday color in my culture, but also the life-giving color of blood (Barrera-Bassols & Toledo, 2005). After this exploration, I came to a similar conclusion in my concept development, that this process would move my weaving too far from the experience of weavers I have been studying. The weaving produced is not a comment or documentation of my chosen subculture, but a communication of an overarching culture of my surroundings I did not choose.

Many of the weavers I have researched do not have a say in the cultural symbols absorbed, prescribed and learned from society and I include myself in this experience as a weaver influenced and guided by my cultural aesthetic and symbols (Feminias et al., 1987). Both through reading literature related to textile production and expressiveness as well as my experience in Indonesia, female weavers are given the task of creating complex symbolic textiles often for garments. This is due to the importance of these textiles and specified roles of cultural production in relation to politics, kinship, folklore and ritual.

“For example, in Samoa and the Trinidads, women are the producers of cloth wealth and they control its distribution in part or in full. Because the circulation of cloth wealth has political consequences and because women figure in the public aspects of its distribution, cloth and women are inherent part of political affairs” (Weiner, 1989, p. 35).

“The art of traditional dyeing is merged with the production of herbal medicines, poisons, abortifacients, and fertility potions in a body of occult knowledge known as *moro*, “blueness,” which is the exclusive possession of a few female specialists... The production of Subanese textiles is also linked to theories of human conception and the growth of the fetus within the womb. A metaphoric parallel between the production of children and the production of cloth informs exchange relations established through the transfer of women from one ancestral village to another. Finally, cloth itself becomes the medium for an inarticulate protest against perceived injustices that afflict women and give their sorrow its particularly “blue” coloring” (Hoskins, 1989, p. 142).

Some women create intricate textiles for their wedding ceremonies or as symbols of fertility in connection to marriage and the female lifecycle (Connors, 1996; Femenias et al., 1987; Forshee,

2001; Gavin, 1996; Hoskins, 1989; Howard, 2007; Kellogg, 2005; March, 1983; McCafferty & McCafferty, 1996; Miller, 2004; Sullivan, 1982). With this, I reflected on the symbols of marriage garments in my culture and decided to weave yardage of white silk. This object will be created through a severe dedication of time like many female weavers of the world and will communicate cultural symbols of abundance and purity.

When looking at weaver's lives and the metaphors their weavings communicate, they hold the ability to nonverbally give information to the viewer. The production of cloth as a material symbol of coming of age, and more typically in my culture, the purchasing of a white garment for single use representing purity, wealth and abundance are concepts combined for this piece (Connors, 1996; Forshee, 20012; Gavin, 1996; Howard, 2007). To weave yardage of white silk as a cultural symbol of the pure to be married, I place myself in the action of weaving the symbolic and raw material for a wedding garment. This yardage will not be finished into a garment, but through the process of weaving this cloth will show dedication, obsession, ability, skill, commitment and in this way, be holding similar meaning to other women weaving marriage garments around the world (Hoskins, 1998).

1/11/12: Inspiration and further development of my perspective in relation to the project

Silk: a fine continuous protein fiber produced by various insect larvae usually for cocoons;

especially: a lustrous tough elastic fiber produced by silkworms and used for textile.

The tuft of long fine styles on an ear of maize (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary & The Free Dictionary).

White: The achromatic color of maximum lightness; the color of objects that reflect nearly all light of all visible wavelengths; the complement or antagonist of black, the other extreme of the neutral gray series. Although typically a response to maximum stimulation of the retina, the perception of white appears always to depend on contrast

Unsullied; pure.

Intensely heated; impassioned:

Ultraconservative or reactionary (Merriam-Webster online dictionary & The Free Dictionary)

Pure: Having a homogeneous or uniform composition; not mixed; free from adulterants or

impurities; free of dirt, defilement, or pollution; free from harshness or roughness and being in tune; marked by chastity (Merriam-Webster online dictionary & The Free Dictionary)

People have intimate relationships with fabric and textiles due to their daily contact with our skin. It is tactile, a sense-memory of touch, smell and often an association of family history. The history of textiles in my family as women's work is not unique. My grandmother was a seamstress and stitched wedding dresses. The connection of femininity with the creating and working with cloth is a reoccurring connection (Connors, 1996; Femenias et al., 1987; Forshee, 2001; Gavin, 1996; Hoskins, 1989; McCafferty & McCafferty, 1996; Sullivan, 1982).

1/12/12: Journaling

As a female weaver, with expectations and learned symbols of my femininity through media, family, history and experience, these inputs inform my understanding of my role in society (Arnett, 1995; Driscoll, 2002). I am a part of the global community and culture of female weavers. I am a part of the global female gender. I also belong to the creative mind. I am a maker, a thinker, a rule breaker, a critiquer, a lover, a dreamer, a curious mind, a strong body, a stubborn spirit and a want to be renegade. I use these elements of myself as a way of knowing my culture and remain aware of these factors when studying the weaving of others.

In the history of looking at culturally expressive art and within anthropology, there has been a long history of ethnocentrism and appropriation. Understanding this I have attempted to be extremely conscious of not appropriating another culture's symbols through motif, color or technique (Graburn, 1976; Russell, 2007). This awareness is a reoccurring theme of my studies. The complicated space between the self and the other in research is interesting to apply to a piece of artwork and the audience.

1/20/12: The mathematics

50 Ends Per Inch (EPI) 45" wide = 2,250 threads
Warp of 10 yards = 22,500 yards

Aprox. 30,000 yard/kilo
1 kilo for warp
2 for weft and finishing

3/17/12: The counting of the warp

The counting of the threads is taking quite a long time. I try to dedicate a few hours every other day to counting. Not to complain, but the muscles under my shoulder blades starts burning from the motion of counting the threads on the board. It takes me roughly 28 minutes to count one inch (50) of threads ten yards long.



4/23/12: The winding

I have completed the counting of my threads and have started winding them on. This has started to require picking at the space between many of the threads to disconnect them from each other due to some fuzz that has started to develop. In Flores, Indonesia I was talking with a weaver, she was telling me that their pieces often take a year to complete. I started counting my threads on Feb. 10th and wonder what the time commitment is ahead of me.



6/06/12: The winding continued

I am so tired of looking at these threads. I have fought with so many knots and have tried many ways to keep the threads from binding with each other's fuzz. I did some research and found a BBC story about silk weavers in the city of Varanasi, India using the lubricant from

condoms on their weaving (Pathak, 2004). I tried it, but the practice of putting it on the shuttle seems to work, whereas putting it on the threads does not. I have reverted to spray starch to size the threads. This is helping them keep their individuality within the masses and masses of threads.

I am still winding and probably have about 6 more feet to go. Each foot as I wind on farther is taking longer due to the accumulation of chaos. Now each foot of winding takes me well over an hour.



I should log the hours from now on because I am about to enter into another very slow section of dressing my loom. I can estimate with the following math:

Counting threads:

Each bundle of 2" = 40 min.

23 bundles = 920min. = 15 hours and 33 minutes

Winding:

Average of 1 hour 20 min/foot

10 yards = 30 " = 36 hours

My plan is to finish winding on this week. I will start threading and order more heddles. I have no idea how many I have on my loom presently, but I will definitely need many more since each warp thread needs to pass through one heddle.

7/12/12: The threading of the warp

I have started threading. It takes me about 40 minutes to thread one bundle of threads, which is two inches. I have 23 bundles to thread. This estimation equals about 15.5 hours. It is very satisfying to pull off the knotted fuzz that gave me so much trouble while winding on the threads. I am wishing now, that as I begin to weave the fuzz does not accumulate again. I borrowed some of my boyfriend's mom's heddles. She is a weaver and surprisingly has the same loom. Conceptually, this connection is interesting.



8/03/12: Placing the reed

I have finished threading and have placed the reed. Four threads/dent. This will create a little bit of a pattern, but I do not want to purchase another reed. Kevin's mom has offered for me to use hers, but I have decided to use my own due to the length of time I am anticipating the weaving to take.



8/04/12: Tying on the warp

I have tied on my threads and have started weaving today. I am hoping that the fuzz does not develop in the cross of my threads during weaving. I will go to the store today and buy a few more cans of starch. With each time consuming step of this project I move on to another. The tedious repetitive work is somewhat meditative. I look forward to passing my first weft.



8/15/12: Weaving process

This is an extremely isolating project. If it is a goal in some places to keep young women in the house occupied, then this project is successful in this idea. I have become a little obsessed. I wake up in the morning, make a cup of coffee and sit down at my loom. I am able to do this because of the horrible state of schools in Chicago at the moment. No work is being planned for residencies in schools right now because there are many other, more elemental, issues to take care of and plan for. At the beginning I wove one inch/hour. I am up to about three inches/hour because I learned the perfect amount of tension for the threads to be under. Not a single thread has broken so far.

8/30/12: Weaving process

As I get closer to the ending of this project I am starting to get worried about going through some sadness upon cutting the silk from my loom. In the past, I have experienced some depression after the finishing of a large project. This project has had such a large part of my days for months now, so much so that it is a part of my daily activities. It is often the first thing I do when I wake up and my last action before bed, if not filling my entire day. I will need to have something else in place so that I don't feel unfocused after such a long period of intense dedication.



9/02/12: Weaving process

I have been at my loom weaving for 72 hours so far and have completed just a few inches over my 6th yard. This is a very isolating project as I said before. I sit at my loom alone for hours a day. In terms of the conceptual/social elements to this project, the fact that this process is isolating is an interesting connection. I sit at my loom obsessively weaving and will realize that the entire day has passed. The muscles of my shoulder blades and chest ache and burn. I am hoping to finish in the next month. I will be continuing my reflection and develop it into a written piece to accompany the piece.



9/06/12: Mending threads

Today the 1st thread broke. It was easy enough to fix. I am actually surprised that this is the first due to the thousands of threads I have on the loom.

9/07/12: Tension issues escalate

The tension of the threads is becoming a huge problem. I have placed huge wads of paper and cloth under the threads to try to create even tension. I still have about a yard on the loom, I will weaves as much as I can, and be happy with the length.



9/12/12: Cutting from the loom

I have finished weaving today. I have woven 8 yards and 5 inches. The tension on the warp began to be so difficult. Threads were breaking and throughout the width it was getting puckered. Instead of attempting to fight with it, I realized it was time to cut it from the loom.



It felt like less of an accomplishment than I expected. It is possible that I have built this moment up too much. So much so that the moment could not live up to the expectation. I will move on to beginning the finishing of the ends. I have decided to hem one side, stitching with the same silk and to braid the other into a very fine fringe to suggest a continuation. I will then wash it, iron it and it will then be finished.

After removing the silk from the loom and taking off the ends from the warping beam, I notice the extreme amount of fuzz that had accumulated. I then took the loom apart and washed it. This felt to be somewhat of a ritual of pressing a reset button or returning my loom to its original state.

**9/16/12: Finishing the ends of the warp**

I have finished both the ends. This feels good. It is truly a secure piece of fabric. I have totaled my hours up tonight at my Dad's house when I was there for dinner. It came out to 306 hours.

9/18/12: Washing the starch away

I washed the silk by hand this morning and draped it over a series of wood dowels in my shower like fresh pasta to dry. I then folded it and ironed it while damp. This process has really changed the texture and sheen of the silk. It is extremely pliable and soft since all the starch has been washed out.

Images of the finished piece

I have put a lot of thought into how to document the finished piece. I tried to shoot a video, wrapping myself in the cloth, but didn't think it captured the abundance the way I had envisioned. I have decided to photograph the weaving folded, showing the layers of the salvages to show the wealth of layers.





Conclusion

I have confronted a complicated mosaic of personal and theoretical concepts. While thinking about identity, culture and my role as a weaver while being attentive to a complicated history of ethnocentrism and appropriation in anthropology and ethnographic art research, a symbolic textile was produced. This project has blended the roles of producer and researcher. The eight yards of white silk, due to the time and commitment taken to produce becomes a sacred object. Understanding the theoretical importance of communicative textiles is relevant to the field of textile research to further the understanding of creative symbolism in utilitarian and ritual art forms. Cloth for everyday use, ceremony and rituals such as marriage and death has evolved as a medium of communication (Cheesman, 2007; Gavin, 1996; Howard, 2007). These symbols are specific to the community, but also a part of the general intimacy of cloth. Textiles have become modes of communication due to their abundance and role in the lives of communities, their intimacy and the amount of time and specialization textiles required for production. From the concept development, through the weaving process and the finishing of the cloth I have blended the theoretical understanding the way textiles evolve as a nonverbal form of communication and the practice of creating a communicative textile relating to my culture.

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