

Something Between Them: Stories of Weaving by Karen Refugee Women

Meighan Mantei
University of Dalhousie

Abstract

Women in many cultural settings and contexts have traditionally used fibers, thread and fabric as a way of expressing the social and political realities shaping their lives. For the Karen of Burma the process of producing textiles, from the initial step of growing cotton to the final stages of weaving, has almost entirely been the work of women. Despite the significance of this activity, the meaning of weaving for refugee women from Burma has been virtually unexplored in discourse concerned with the sixty year old civil war.

Employing feminist ethnography in Thailand and Canada this study explores the meaning of weaving for 10 Karen refugee women as they transition from their villages in Burma to Thai refugee camps and eventually, for some, into resettlement in Canada. The analysis stresses the importance of context in the formation of meaning and purpose from weaving. The findings suggest interdependency between weaver, the weaving and context. As the weavers leave Burma, the purpose for weaving is transitioned from the making of clothing for community belonging, self-sufficiency, and cultural identification, into a means of generating income and filling time in Thailand. The study concludes that as Karen women resettle in Canada, the practice of traditional weaving is used, altered and dismissed in the formation of identity. Weaving is a connection to the past, to what has been left behind, and can be rejected in resettlement as it binds the hopefulness of the future to the painful memories of the past, or alternatively be gripped to, as a connection of what was. Weaving can also be a combination of both of these elements, a push and pull of memory and forgetting.