

Abstract

This research aimed to discover whether weavers could identify markers of authenticity of their own community-based and culturally bound hand-woven textiles. If so, how do they do it? What is the nature and meaning of these markers?

Three case studies were selected that represented communities making such textiles at different levels of institutionalisation. The first case focused on the non-institutionalised Mosuo hand-woven textiles, a minority group in southwest China. This is contrasted with the fully legally institutionalised and branded Harris Tweed of Scotland. In between these two extremes, a study on Bhutanese kiras where the design and weaving of textiles are culturally institutionalised without a legal framework or a commercial brand.

A pilot study phase informed the use of an ethnographic approach to field research conducted at the three sites employing a diverse range of methods including face-to-face interviews based on semi-structured questionnaires. When opportunities arose, indirect methods were included such as unobtrusive observations, examinations of exemplar textiles, and review through 'thick' descriptions in reflective journals. Data from these qualitative studies were distilled and confirmed through quantitative follow-up methods.

The results indicated that for the Mosuo weavers, it is her experience of being a Mosuo weaver and the spirit in which the textiles are woven that determined authenticity. For culturally structured societies such as in Bhutan, authenticity was dependent on the contexts in which the kira was meant to be worn, reflected in turn through the physical characteristics of the kira. The markers of authenticity of Harris Tweed relied on objective characteristics including the geographical site where the cloth is produced. Central to the experience of the weaver in all three studies was the pride in weaving the textile, a finding which identifies this element as a common marker of its authenticity.