

## **Chapter 1: General Introduction**

### 1.1 Background of Research

The research questions arose from the author's practice and professional experience whilst working on artisan projects in various Asian countries. One of the aims common to all these projects was to assist artisan communities in generation of income by expanding their markets into non-traditional sectors such as the tourist sector and the export trade. As such, the development of traditional crafts was a major component of these projects; traditional craft objects tended to be re-presented as contemporary products in order to satisfy the demands and tastes of non-local customers, such as tourists and foreign buyers (UNESCO Hanoi, 2010; ITC Laos, 2011; UNDP Bhutan, 2007; UN China, 2008). Project activities involved substituting new materials, changing the form, varying the function, improving the process of fabrication and reinterpreting the meaning of these objects for such new markets. In the course of such transformations, the author was conscious of the fine balance between design innovation and retention of cultural authenticity of the craft item.

Throughout the author's working experience, it was observed that many Asian countries did not have institutions governing the quality, forms and process of making these folk craft products. If these existed at all, such institutions were in their infancy, lacking the sophistication to articulate such complex concepts. Furthermore, there was no formal or institutional definition of a craft's cultural characteristics (UNDP Bhutan, 2007; UN China, 2008; UNDP Bangladesh, 2007). Hence, it was concluded that there were no widely accepted guidelines to recommend the extent to which a traditional craft object could be changed or modified while still remaining within the cultural boundaries of the artisan.

The author's journey has led him to question the extent to which interventions and innovations to traditional crafts can be implemented, before their cultural authenticity is threatened or lost. Therefore, the author asserts that it is imperative that those characteristics of crafts that fundamentally embed the cultural identity of the community be identified and retained before any transformation process can be carried out. The recognition of these essential cultural characteristics is expressed as markers of authenticity in this study.

## 1.2 Aims

This research aims to:

- a. Identify markers of authenticity for community-based/culturally bound objects;
- b. Contribute to the dialogue between culture and development by identifying cultural authenticity prior to development interventions, in the field of crafts, design, the arts, cultural tourism, heritage conservation, etc.;
- c. Explore the definition of cultural authenticity.

## 1.3 Research Focus on Hand-woven Textiles

There are many different types of artisan products, but this study will focus only on community-based/culturally bound hand-woven textiles. This is because hand-woven textiles are central to much of the author's work. Moreover, because of the universality of hand-woven textiles in all cultures, through time and space, such a focus enables easier cross-cultural comparisons between different communities. Quoting Goett (2010), textiles are core to human existence as they permeate through 'surrounding, supporting and touching our bodies from birth to death... Human life without textiles is unimaginable' (Goett, 2010, p6). Furthermore, textiles embed meaning by narrating stories, acting as sign-posts for our memories, as they are ever present in our lives and more – status, trends, religion, etc. (Andrew, 2000; Lessing, 1999; Bickle, 2003).

## 1.4 Objectives

Referring to the above aims, and with specific focus on hand-woven textiles, the objectives of this research seek to address the following questions:

- a. Is it possible for weavers themselves to identify markers of authenticity of their own textiles?
- b. How do weavers identify these markers of authenticity?
- c. Is it possible to develop a method to elicit from weavers markers of authenticity for their own work – and to define these?
- d. If indeed it is possible to develop these markers, what are the markers of authenticity for community-based and culturally bound hand-woven textiles?
- e. What are the implications of these markers of authenticity?
- f. What is the significance of the maker's articulation of authenticity?
- g. What can this study contribute to the current discussion on authenticity and associated cultural realms?

### 1.5 Justification for the Selection of Case Study Sites

This project selected three different types of community-based/culturally bound hand-woven textiles at various stages of institutionalisation and from different parts of the world. ‘Institutionalisation’, according to the Oxford Dictionaries website, is to ‘establish something, (typically a practice or activity) as a convention or norm in an organisation or culture’ (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.[b]). In this study, institutionalisation of community-based/culturally bound hand-woven textiles is defined as the process of structuring the informal weaving industry into an organised system with legal implications, stated roles and responsibilities. Therefore, case studies for this research will encompass communities producing hand-woven textiles informally, with no legal official status, to one that is formally established. These case studies with such a diversity of status will assist in drawing broader and more comprehensive conclusions on how weavers identify markers of authenticity in regards to their own cloth and the nature of these markers, especially in relation to the varying degree of institutionalisation of community-based/culturally bounded hand-woven textiles. Furthermore, these case studies will also illustrate from different cultural contexts to assist in comprehending the meaning of authenticity. Such diversity will further support the rigour of the research and the strength of this study’s conclusion.

Hence, this research has selected three disparate community-based/culturally bound hand-woven textile forms at different stages of institutionalisation. These are Mosuo textiles from a Chinese ethnic minority in Yunnan, Southwest China, Bhutanese kiras and Scottish Harris Tweed textiles. In terms of the institutional development of these textiles, the Mosuo textiles are the least institutionalized while the most established is the Scottish Harris Tweed cloth where an organization was formed between 1905 and 1909 (Thompson, 1969) to govern the making and marketing of the cloth. Between these extremes, Bhutan, in 2011, established the Agency of the Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC) to implement the ‘Seal of Origin’ programme to authenticate Bhutanese craft products (APIC, n.d.).

Moreover, the selection of these communities was also based upon the author’s close link to two of the proposed communities – Mosuo and Bhutan – as he had worked in both communities prior to this study. The author served as a UNDP consultant and visited the Mosuo community twice and was familiar with many of the weavers before selecting and embarking on his research. As for the case of Bhutan, the author worked

and lived there for five years (2004 – 2009) and knew many of the weavers on a personal level. The author also visited the Outer Hebrides once before starting his field mission and during this initial visit, he established connections with several weavers he met at a fair in Tarbert. Hence, the author has developed relationships with members of the communities based on mutual trust and respect before doing his research work. According to Cole (2005), there are several advantages in selecting such sites because access to these communities will be easier and culture shock minimised. Furthermore, trust and respect established in the past enables one to access rich insights into the communities.

Detailed arguments to justify their selection will be further explored in Chapter Two when discussing the context of each individual case study.

### 1.6 Thesis Structure

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter One narrates the circumstances that led to this investigation and declares the aims and objectives of this research. A brief account of the research framework and a short justification for the selection of the case studies are also introduced.

The genesis, theories, applications and perspectives of authenticity are introduced in Chapter Two. As these are wide ranging, a paradigm synthesising the various views of authenticity has been developed to better comprehend this concept. The context and present status of each of the case studies - Mosuo, Bhutanese kiras and Harris Tweed textiles - are also described in order to provide the reader with a greater appreciation regarding the background to each case study. At the end of the chapter, each case study is juxtaposed against various authenticity theories while highlighting the gaps which this study aims to address.

Chapter Three details the learning and testing of various research methods during the pilot studies in order to identify the most suitable methods to elicit information from weavers. These initial studies also assisted in understanding how weavers identify markers of authenticity, contributing to the construction of the questionnaire and the analysis of the data.

Chapter Four describes the methodology used to conduct this study. Although the basic structure of inquiry is similar in all three case studies, due to the different contexts of the Mosuo, Bhutan and Scottish Harris Tweed weavers, the practice for each case study has been slightly modified to suit cultural, social, political, geographical and economic sensitivities of the situation.

Chapter Five describes the findings of each case study, with the discussion framed against paradigms and theories of authenticity as described in Chapter Two. The context of each community is also discussed in order to propose the markers of authenticity for Mosuo, Bhutanese kira and Harris Tweed textiles. Finally, there is an attempt to identify a common marker of authenticity that could apply to all three case studies.

In the final chapter, the close of this research recalls the objectives of this study, and assesses the results of this research according to the objectives. Suggestions are given where future work can be conducted. Significantly, the research proposes that the methodology used to identify markers of authenticity could also be employed to understand authenticity in other cultural domains especially in relation to innovation and development of other cultural products.