

ACTION RESEARCH

WEAVING BORDER CROSSINGS

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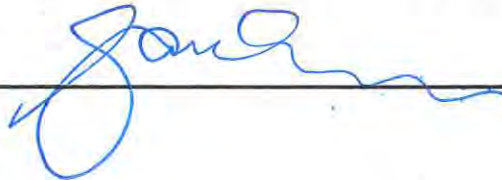
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ABSTRACT

As art education navigates its relationship to cultural identities in an increasingly global society, this study looks at the meaning of weaving amidst one people group. For more than 60 years, the Karen people of Southeast Asia have been displaced, fled legally and illegally to other nations, and have become citizens of non-Asian countries worldwide due to resettlement through the United Nations. This study is an autoethnography analyzing the meaning of weaving within the Karen culture and my own cultural transformation through researching for a place-based weaving curriculum intended for Karen children. Living and working along the Thai-Burma border, I interview Karen individuals and other key players involved in Karen weaving projects. Through the analysis of the woven products, the weaving process, the changing times, and the relationships formed around weaving, I attempt to make the Karen culture accessible to other outsiders like myself. My own biases are brought to the surface; while weaving myself into the local Karen community through of deeper understanding of their culture, I am simultaneously made more aware of the non-Karen portions of my identity. This richly woven dialogue is not unique to me but seen more and more in our global society as a natural outgrowth of cultures interacting in place and time.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this study, I used an autoethnographic approach to study my own cultural transformation during the development of a place-based art curriculum of weaving for Karen children living along the Thai-Burma¹ border. I began working with this population in February 2013. Since August 2014, I have been living in Karen villages inside of Thailand. Prior to Thailand, I worked as an art educator at a K-12 international school in China. My own educational experiences as a student, K-12 through undergraduate degree, took place in southeastern Pennsylvania immersed in predominantly White United States culture. My research question was: How have I woven myself into a place-based art curriculum that I develop to focus on weaving intended for teaching a group of children living at an orphanage?

Context of the Problem: Connecting to Students' Cultural Identity

Living on the outskirts of Philadelphia, I grew up in a traditional White suburban family. Faith and family were very important in my life. I had stronger relationships with teachers and other adults than with peers my own age. I also loved interacting with young children,

¹ Since 1989, the military regime in Burma has promoted the name Myanmar. The United States has not adopted this name (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015). Additionally, many aid organizations have rejected the name change. Continuing to use the name Burma is a protest to the military regime and a denial of their legitimacy to rule. Because the organization where I work and the country of which I am a citizen both use the name Burma, I have chosen to use the name Burma throughout this action research project.

as two of my siblings were born 7 years and 10 years after myself. Arts and crafts were often the vehicle for bonding with younger children.

In high school, I refined my interest in teaching to the specific field of art education. During my four years of undergraduate study at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, I traveled abroad for three weeklong arts-study trips to Europe. I also traveled independently to Qingdao, China, to visit a friend studying Chinese at a local university.

During my trip to China, I was made aware of international schools and one particular school in Qingdao. I pursued employment at the International School of Qingdao (ISQ), then known as Qingdao MTI International School, and began as a first-year elementary art teacher in August 2008. I had significant freedom to modify and develop the curriculum, even participating in a Visual Arts Standards and Benchmarks revision for our consortium of schools.

I became particularly attached to weaving during my first year of classroom teaching. In helping first graders create a paper loom, I realized the connection between measuring every 4 cm along a ruler and addition using a number line. For some students, this was just the connection they needed to succeed at the task. I loved watching the students recognize the patterning in weaving and replicate it in their own work.

As the curriculum developed, I incorporated increasingly complex patterns and materials in successive grades of elementary art. Early childhood weaving centers were simple pre-made paper looms and strips of paper for children to explore weaving. First graders

measured and cut the looms themselves, mastering the checkboard weave. Second graders wove with thinner strips on pre-made paper looms while learning to following twill and herringbone patterns. Third graders removed rows from burlap and wove back into the fabric with yarn. Fourth grade created radial looms from clay and wove their circular designs in yarn. Fifth graders warped their own cardboard looms and wove with “plarn” (yarn made by cutting strips from plastic bags).

In spring 2011, with the support of ISQ, I began the Masters of Professional Studies in Art Education program at the Pennsylvania State University. Halfway through the program, I traveled to the Thai-Burma border with the international youth group from Qingdao, China. That ten-day mission trip solidified ideas that were developing in my personal faith. I returned to China and to teaching at ISQ but redirected my future goals to work with children and youth affected by the longstanding conflict in Burma (Blessed Homes, n.d.).

On two subsequent trips, I made arrangements to move to the Thai-Burma border upon completion of my contract at ISQ. I joined work as an unpaid volunteer at a Norwegian non-profit organization, Blessed Homes, which runs small orphanages in Karen villages in and around Mae Sot, Tak province, Thailand. Beyond administrative support, my role includes English lessons and tutoring with the children, ages 2 to 22, as well as arts-based programming that I initiate. This might be as simple as providing colored pencils and sitting around a table with children who want to join the art-making space. More elaborate projects have included multi-day murals.

During school breaks, I have extended time at the orphanages with the children since they are home during the day. I also have the freedom to structure and arrange holiday programming. A place-based curriculum on weaving connects to my previous experience of teaching weaving in an international school elementary art classroom. Karen culture also has a deep tie to weaving. Learning about the significance of weaving within Karen culture connects me with their cultural identity, connects the children to their own heritage, and provide a space wherein we, Karen staff, children, and myself, can connect across language differences through shared experience.

Background of the Problem: Orphaned from Cultural Identity

The nation of Burma has been a place of civil unrest for more than 60 years. Particularly, since 1988, the ethnic minorities have been treated harshly by the militant or nominally civilian government (Partners Relief and Development, n.d.).² Many have fled to surrounding nations such as Thailand. In fact, the Karen people, a hill-tribe ethnic group of

² During the course of this research, the nation of Burma held a historic election. The November 2015 election was the first in 25 years, and the government had refused to recognize the results of the previous election in 1990. People around the world, and especially in the Thai-Burma region, watched in hope and hesitation, confident that the people would choose candidates outside of the military's party, but uncertain if the military would honor the election results and surrender power. As in 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the majority, taking 80% of the contested seats in the election. This time, under the watchful eyes of the world and a populace vocal on social media, the military acknowledged defeat. Yet the constitution reserves 25% of the seats for the military. It also bars Ms. Suu Kyi from being president because she has children who have foreign nationality as British citizens. Any change to the constitution must pass by a vote greater than 75%, retaining significant position and unofficial veto power for the military (BBC News, 2016).

Southeast Asia, were previously unbound by modern-day political borders. Karen tribes have lived in Thailand for generations. Thai-Karen individuals have status as citizens of Thailand. Still others have crossed the Moei border river in recent times, seeking safety and a better life. “In the period from 1940’s to 1984, Karen refugees were not specifically regarded as ‘refugees’ since they engaged in repeated seasonal movements between Burma and Thailand,” seeking safety from Burmese military attacks in the dry season and returning to their villages “when the rainy season came and the government soldiers retreated” (Lee, 2014, pp. 466-467). As Burmese military technology advanced, the government was able to launch operations regardless of season. These political and military actions impacted Burmese-Karen groups, who ceased in their migratory patterns, instead choosing to live in Thailand’s growing refugee camps. In the decade that followed, in the 1990s, refugees were not strictly confined to the camp boundaries and thus engaged in various opportunities with those living in nearby Thai-Karen villages, with whom they “shared cultural and language affinities” (Lee, 2014, p. 467). Due to political, economic, and military relations between Thailand, Burma, and rebel armies in Burma, freedom for the Karen people to migrate has been greatly restricted since 1995.

Recent political changes in Burma have allowed some Karen individuals to move back and forth across the Burma-Thai border with a Burmese passport and Thai work visa. Without this, the legal way of entrance for the past 20 years, according to Thai law, confined displaced Burmese to life in a Thai refugee camp.³ Currently, there are nine refugee camps

³ The status of Burmese within Thailand is a highly nuanced situation. According to the Human Rights Center at the University of California, “The Royal Thai Government is not party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol and does not officially recognize the Burmese as refugees” (2013,

in Thailand along the border with Burma. Though considered temporary, these camps have existed for more than three decades. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents 120,000 Burmese, mainly of Karen (79%) and Karenni (10%) origin, who have sought refuge in the shelters within Thailand (Human Rights Center, 2013; UNHCR, “Country Operations Profile – Myanmar,” 2015; UNHCR, “Country Operations Profile – Thailand,” 2015). Mae La, the largest camp, is home to more than 45,000 people, mostly of Karen ethnicity (Picone, 2015, para. 9). Steep mountains contain the people; their homes are stacked tightly against the escarpment. On the other side, “the camp is policed by the Thai army,” restricting residents to “ramshackle border camps with no freedom of movement” (Picone, 2015, caption, para. 17). As the years go on, “this state of displacement and exile, of being so close to home and yet so impossibly far away,” strips humanity from the inhabitants (Picone, 2015, para. 11). They remain alive through provided food rations and basic medical care, but the limitations on education, employment, and possibilities for advancement mean they are not truly living.

Many more border-crossers forgo this route and chose to live illegal and undocumented. There are an estimated 2.3 million migrant workers from Burma living in Thailand, with 150,000-250,000 migrants living in Tak province (International Rescue Committee, 2011; Partners Relief and Development, n.d.).

p. 28). Yet being a border nation to Burma, Thailand is forced to deal with border-crossers. The nation’s 1979 Immigrant Act defines those who enter without a visa, work permit, or official authorization as subject to arrest, detention, and deportation. There is a special exemption, under Section 17, which allows displaced Burmese to reside in the nine official refugee camps and defines those residents as “temporarily displaced.” If they leave the camp without documentation, they return to the status of irregular or illegal migrant. “In this respect, refugee status, in the view of Thai authorities, is based more on an individual’s physical location in Thailand than on the circumstances that motivated the individual’s departure from Burma” (Human Rights Center, 2013, p. 28).

Due to ongoing fighting, inadequate healthcare, and refugee circumstances, numerous children on either side of the border are left orphaned. Others come from dissolved families that are not able or choose not to care for their children. Many of these migrant children are stateless and not considered citizens in Thailand or Burma. As cited in *Bangkok Post*, the Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights estimated in their 2012 annual report that “as many as 200,000 migrant children live in Thailand unaccompanied, and with little in the way of government protection” (Verbruggen, 2013, para. 20). A large number of private orphanages have been started along the Thai-Burma border to care for this population of children.

Growing up in an orphanage is not natural; children are birthed into this world through parents, not an institution. All of the children at these orphanages have suffered trauma in one form or another as their natural order of family has been disrupted. Whether they recall it or not, the fact that their parents were unable to care for them has impacted their understanding of their own Karen culture. They have been raised in an institution, not a traditional Karen home with nuclear and extended family members. Institutions vary in their structural arrangements and affinity to Karen culture, as organizations are often lead, staffed, or funded by non-Karen people. This puts an additional strain on the cultural identity of the children.

Weaving Theoretical Framework: A Place-Based Curriculum

In researching weaving, I used place-based education as the theoretical framework for the study, wherein “local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences” are the basis for learning school subjects (“What is Place-Based Education,” n.d., para. 1). The educational approach “has emerged over the past decade from the fertile intersection of environmental education and community development” (“Origins,” n.d., para. 1). Although place-based educators are particularly opposed to “standardized, high-stakes testing,” my development of a place-based weaving curriculum was not about transforming daily school experience (“Origins,” n.d., para. 1). Instead, the curriculum was approached as a supplemental learning experience for Karen children at an orphanage.

This investigation hinged on the principle that “learning focuses on local themes, systems, and content” (“Principles,” n.d.). To address this concern of place-based education, I needed to investigate weaving within the local culture. What does weaving mean in Karen culture?

Weaving was then both literal and metaphorical within this study. It began as the subject matter for the place-based art curriculum. Yet in the process of development and potential future implementation of the place-based curriculum, I wove myself into the Karen community and the lives of the children at the orphanage.

Significance of the Study

Defining art, and what is taught in art education, has been the subject of countless papers, conferences, meetings, and critical reviews. According to June King McFee, “Art is not a separate entity from life. Art is a part of life” (as cited in Tavin, 2005, p. 10). “Art is everything from a bread wrapper to a non-objective painting, from a teakettle to a skyscraper” (as cited in Tavin, 2005, p. 10). McFee has been a voice for visual culture, impacting the direction of art education for more than 50 years. Viewing art as a social study, she appealed to art educators to stop neglecting “the communicative role of the arts, historically and cross-culturally” (Chalmers, 2005, p. 10). In a rationale for an expanded view of items approached as art, McFee wrote, “In contemporary society, non-verbal symbols are used to transmit ideas; express qualities, feelings, and emotions; note varied rank, status, and social roles; and to persuade changes in behavior and decision-making” (as cited in Chalmers, 2005, p. 11). She goes on to specifically list clothing, such as the Karen woven garments presented in this study, as one area of visual culture. This study is rooted in the cross-cultural examination of such an aspect of visual culture and my own understanding of art and aesthetics. I seek to understand the ideas being communicated in the Karen culture, and specifically see how social roles are expressed through the weaving of a culture other than my own.

This is also in line with one of McFee’s pleas to the world of art education. Speaking at the 1965 “Seminar in Art Education for Research and Curriculum Development” held at The Pennsylvania State University, “she challenged White middle class art educators and scholars to be aware of their White privilege and bias, as she asked them to embrace diversity” (Keifer-Boyd et al., 2016). I am a White female art educator from the United

States, not unlike herself. Investigating the weaving of the culture in which I now live is to embrace diversity, and in the autoethnography, analyze my own bias through research in higher education. McFee reflected that during her own doctoral program at Stanford, she:

Began to investigate cultural and economic differences among people that clearly influenced their exposure to art and their ability to regard it. How art transmits cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs; how art relates to cultural maintenance and the enculturation of children; and how art functions as a major communication system in society became central themes in my thinking. (McFee, 1984, p. 188)

Through this study, I approach Karen weaving as an outsider and look at what is valued. In dealing with displaced people, orphaned children, and a previously isolated people that are rapidly being a part of the global community, the refrains of cultural maintenance and the enculturation of children emerge.

These ideas are not new, as McFee presented them to the world of art education decades ago. Yet they are ever relevant, particularly as the world continues to make sense a growing refugee crisis and cultural identities in an increasingly interconnected global society. It is fitting to examine and document the role of weaving to the Karen cultural identity along with my own cultural journey of understanding.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE ROLE OF WEAVING TO THE KAREN CULTURAL IDENTITY

Weaving has a cultural connection for the Karen but is often undocumented in books about the art of Southeast Asia. Web-based information regarding Karen weaving is primarily sourced from three types of websites: tourism agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO)/fair-trade textile organizations, and Karen cultural groups, especially among those resettled in third countries.⁴

Numerous tourism agencies offer cultural tours for visitors to Northern Thailand.⁵ In addition to visiting traditional villages, tourists can arrange for lessons in weaving. Two-day tours include shopping at a local market, cooking lessons, hiking, an overnight stay, and weaving your own item such as a scarf. Agencies make lofty claims about the role of weaving and a visitor's ability to participate in the culture, stating:

⁴ Third country is a term used by UNHCR to refer to a country of resettlement. The first country is the country of origin. The camp host country, or country of asylum, is the second country. The country that accepts the refugee for permanent settlement is the third country (UNHCR, "Resettlement – A New Beginning in a Third Country," n.d.).

⁵ <http://www.chiangmaiecolodges.com/traditional-karen-weaving-experience/>
<http://www.guidetrip.com/s/Thailand/Chiang-Mai/Traditional-Karen-Weaving-Experience-Wit>
<http://borderlinecollective.org/courses/weaving-course/>
<https://www.withlocals.com/experience/traditional-karen-weaving-class-two-days--e1288aa2/>
<http://www.nextstepthailand.com/packages-tours/karen-weaving-karen-culture/>
http://www.tripadvisor.co.nz/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g293917-d2441525-i90846918-Next_Step_Thailand_Travel_with_Joe_Cycling_and_Hiking_Private_Day_Tours-C.html
<http://www.tigertrailthailand.com/images/learn-karen-weaving>

Karen women are proud of their traditional Karen weaving techniques and they present a huge part of Karen culture. Their weaving patterns and colours are what distinguishes them from other tribes at first glance. In this respect, weaving is central to the Karen culture as a whole, and by taking a two day Karen weaving class, you can immerse yourself in this culture while also learning a new and unique skill! (Samart, n.d., para. 1)

With price tags of over \$100 and positive reviews on their pages, these constructed experiences seem to deliver Karen culture for creatively curious travelers.

Another sector writing about weaving within the Karen culture is NGOs with weaving projects and other organizations selling fair-trade ethnic textiles. Partners Relief and Development has been running a weaving project, Intertwine, in remote villages in Thailand for more than 19 years. The women, weaving on back-strap looms, combine traditional techniques with aesthetics intended for market in the charity's countries of registration.⁶ As Partners writes, "providing a way for them to promote and sell their craft not only allows them to continue their traditions, it also helps them provide for their families" (Partners Relief and Development, n.d., para. 1). Some Intertwine items are for sale in their offices in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai but Partners' primary retail audience is Westerners living outside of Thailand via their online store.

⁶ Partners Relief and Development is a registered charity in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

WEAVE, the Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment, also runs projects in villages along the Thai-Burma border. In May 2015, the executive director wrote about an exploratory trip to a village near Mae Hong Son. They met with a women's textile group composed of 40 women. "Wearing their traditional clothes – woven sarong, men's top/shirt and embroidered blouses is a part of their daily life. And this is no surprise as Karen girls learn how to weave and embroider as early as 10 years old. These local/indigenous practices are what keep their culture and tradition alive" (Urgel, 2015, para. 3). In discussing different weaving and embroidery designs, the guests saw the women come alive in "shar(ing) their ideas about color combinations, patterns and designs," as they looked to create "new designs and products that suit the demands of the outside market and at the same time protect and sustain their indigenous traditions, local knowledge, and good practices" (Urgel, 2015, para. 5-6). The women weavers are more than a factory of workers producing textiles for consumption. "Physically, they may be just weaving beautiful fabrics. However, culturally and emotionally, they are weaving the beautiful patterns of their lives into the beautiful pieces they are creating" (Urgel, 2015, para. 6). WEAVE works to honor that relationship while opening their goods to a larger market and, thus, advancing the community through economics.

WEAVE primarily sells their goods to tourists in Thailand and Partners Relief and Development to those in their countries of registration, but NGOs with weaving projects include those run by individuals from other Asian nations. Chimmuwa, founded in 2004, is a Taiwanese organization named for the *say moh wah*, a traditional white dress worn by unmarried Karen women (Chimmuwa – About, n.d.). They pride themselves in doing each

part of the weaving process, from raw materials to finished products for sale (Chimmuwa, n.d.). Items are sold both in the Borderline Shop in Mae Sot and in Taiwan. In addition to stimulating the local women through employment, Chimmuwa profits go back to the Thai-Burma border for investment in educational programs for children (Chimmuwa – About, n.d.). Through their Facebook page and website, Chimmuwa spreads information about Karen weaving to a Mandarin-literate audience.

Literature about Karen weaving practices also comes from community organizations for resettled Karen populations. Some groups, like the *Ei Mer Karen Weavers* of Utah and *Weaving Together* of Portland, Oregon, are organized solely around weaving. In other cases, a larger refugee assistance group or Karen cultural organization offer weaving programs. In these groups, weaving is a mechanism to pass cultural traditions to younger generations, particularly when separated from the place in which that culture developed.

By providing a space for women to practice traditional weaving, pass the skills onto future generations, and educate the broader community, the Ei Mer Karen Weaving Group of Utah give(s) the Karen who are living outside of their home country a way to maintain their culture and practices. (Ei Mer Karen Weaving Group of Utah, n.d., para. 4)

A similar group in Australia is known as “*Pee Pee*,” the Sgaw Karen word for grandmother, emphasizing the role of the elder in teaching cultural identity (Diversitat Arts, n.d.).

Homespun, the program offered through the Karen Organization of San Diego, is a weekly

weaving class for youth that relies on the older generation to be the instructors. This gives purpose to the elders who typically have a harder time adjusting to the new country.

Although the program has not yet been able to start microenterprise opportunities for the Karen women, founder Grace Michel sees other ways in which it empowers the refugees. For the grandmothers, they get to see the youth interested in learning their heritage and keeping their traditions alive. Additionally, when navigating the third country, refugee children often become the linguistic and cultural translators for the older generations. “The traditional mother-daughter relationship may be reversed sometimes, but for at least an hour a week during weaving class, everything is in its right place. Kids as learners, and elders as teachers” (Burks, 2014, para. 18). This intergenerational transaction mimics the traditional exchange of culture prior to resettlement.

Weaving is also a venue to engage in the economic, artistic, and educational aspects of the third country. If they want to sell beyond their own community, Karen weavers face the same intercultural play faced by the NGO weaving projects—how to create something that remains rooted in Karen culture but accessible to outsiders. In Portland, the weavers consulted with Jess Evans, a local businesswoman whose shop focuses on handmade international goods. Evans taught about gender expectations, making suggestions such as shortening the fringe for unisex bags. “In Burma, men view fringe as a sign of masculinity. They like big bags that can hold lots of beer and cigarettes” (Parks, 2014, para. 12). To adjust for the Portland market, Evans also narrowed the abundant color palette and focused on seasonal expectations. Coming from the monsoon climate of wet and dry seasons, four seasons with color implications is a foreign concept to the resettled refugees.

Weaving Together introduced themselves to the Portland crowd, prior to sales, through demonstrations at a Labor Day weekend craft festival. Local libraries and textile societies are among other organizations to host Karen weaving demonstrations, thus connecting and including the resettled Karen in the local culture of their new place (East Side Freedom Library, 2015; Creative Australia, n.d.; Textile Appreciation Society of Atlanta, 2014).

Though little has been documented about the specific meanings of colors, patterns, designs, and forms in Karen weaving aesthetics, the role of weaving with the culture has been the subject of studies, both for those living in the camps and resettled in third countries.

Dudley (2011) analyzed production and consumption in the camps, specifically related to food and weaving. The focus of this study is Karenni people in the camps along the Thai-Burma border, but the “exploration of refugee narratives of their pre-displacement lives and migratory journeys, and of the implications of the new, camp context” translates into the Karen experience (Dudley, 2011, p. 743).

The Karen and Karenni are both hill tribes of the Thai-Burma region, living near each other in Burma and mixed together in some of the camps. “Karenni and other refugees work hard and creatively to maintain a sense of continuity with the past, with ‘home’ and with whom they perceive themselves to be” (Dudley, 2011, p. 746). Dudley finds connections to the material in eating and wearing, and by extension preparing food and creating clothing provides “insight into the fundamentally cultural processes through which refugees actively and creatively seek to make meaning” of their circumstances, “unwillingly dwelling somewhere other than one’s familiar place and actively seeking to create a sense of being

‘at home’” (Dudley, 2011, p. 743). In their pre-exile life, women wove clothing and bags for one’s own family and/or for sale. “Being *displaced* inevitably alters forced migrants’ connections with the physical world of places, objects and other people of which they are a part” (Dudley, 2011, p. 742). To weave in the camp is not merely to ensure the physical covering of their body or to increase their income, but to engage in “an occupation intrinsic to being (Karenni) and to the meaningful functioning of their lives” (Dudley, 2011, p. 751). The familiar skills, now done in a new place, connect refugees to their pre-camp lives, and the product, a woven garment, becomes an act of performance. “This is intimate, bodily continuity with the past. ... Wearing this dress, repeatedly folding the skirt-cloth and frequently adjusting the head-cloth, all continue performances that were basic to quotidian life in the pre-displacement past” (Dudley, 2011, p. 751). It is a “practice of remembering” with “action as memory, memory as action” (Dudley, 2011, p. 752). As Dudley wrote, “real, physical continuity of place is definitionally impossible for refugees; the camp is not and never will be the place whence they have come” (Dudley, 2011, p. 752). Yet in the creating and embodied memory of wearing the woven, refugees commemorate and sustain their cultural identity regardless of place and displacement.

Another study, of Karen resettled in the United States, also analyzes the value of maintaining a culture of weaving when displaced. Instead of being in a constructed camp culture, the subjects in this study have been placed into a third country—living in Salt Lake City, Utah, United States. Smith, Stephenson, and Gibson-Satterthwaite (2013) approach weaving as an occupation that defines Karen culture and daily life. One study participant, Paw Law, was taught this same philosophy from her grandmother, who stressed to Paw

Law “that it was her responsibility, as a Karen woman, to acquire this skill and to pass the skill of weaving on to the next generation” (Smith, Stephenson, & Gibson-Satterthwaite, 2013, p. 28). Her grandmother taught her to weave while they lived in a camp along the Thai-Burma border, but Paw Law grew to love weaving so much that she brought her tools and thread with her when she was resettled in Salt Lake City. This is unique, as most Karen women do not bring their back-strap weaving equipment, sometimes at the explicit direction of their resettlement agency.

Once in the third country, Karen individuals are in and amidst a new culture. “Refugees may decide to maintain their own cultural values or adopt the new culture’s values, but either way, they are constantly reminded of the differences by virtue of living in an unfamiliar and strange place” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 26). As a people “rapidly becoming a community in diaspora,” gathering to weave gives the women a space to connect over memories of past village and camp life, along with discussing current difficulties in resettlement. Through weaving, they “preserve this integral part of their culture, adjust to a new environment, maintain their hope for the future, and prevent the negative effects of prolonged occupational deprivation” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 29). This is not just important for the individual, but also for the community, as the products of their weaving are a part of daily life and cultural ceremonies. For Paw Law, it means creating traditional items and designing new Americanized items to “portray her culture at Karen celebrations, ceremonies, and cultural events” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 28). This creative negotiation, merging her Karen knowledge and skills with the culture in which she finds herself placed, is itself an act of being and navigating self within place.

The current narratives, be it NGO website or academic study, are of Karen State, Burma, as home, of the camp as exile, and a third location as permanent estrangement. But for Karen children living outside of Burma, are the constructs of home, exile, and estrangement applicable to their cultural narrative? They participate in the collective cultural memory of displacement but may have no personal memory of a life prior to the camp, a Thai village, or a third country. Like a second-generation immigrant, they must navigate the inherited and the (new) local. Through developing a place-based curriculum of weaving, I intend to open the cultural past to children without the traditional family support structure. The proposed weaving program, researched in this autoethnography, will not so much be a space to rehearse their previous life but one to explore their cultural heritage while making sense of their own identity and sense of place.

CHAPTER 3

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY WITHIN ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is autoethnography within action research.⁷ Autoethnography is a “method that combines life history and ethnography.” It is not merely a narrative, but “a reflexive approach in which ethnographers analyze their own activity and life experiences (usually within the context of field work)” (Reed-Dahanay, 2006, para. 1). According to Pace, “autoethnography is gaining momentum as a research method within the creative and performing arts, partly because of the opportunity it provides for writers, artists, performers, and others to reflect critically upon their personal and professional experiences” (2012, p. 2). For the purpose of this study, I analyzed how my cultural identity changed as a result of designing a place-based art curriculum of weaving for Karen children. Developing a relevant curriculum required deeper research into the Karen culture, specifically interviewing cultural members and examining relevant cultural artifacts (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The process of autoethnography allowed me to analyze how I have woven myself into the Karen community through a place-based art curriculum action research project. Autoethnography falls in line with the action research cycle—reflecting, planning, implementing, reflecting, and so on. In this process, I reflected on my cultural identity, planned field experiences to cross-cultures, implemented the experiences, and reflected on the experience in order to plan a curriculum that could be implemented in the future and then become the subject of further reflection.

⁷ I have received IRB exempt research status (STUDY00003280). A copy of the exemption determination is found in Appendix A.

Though I have been learning the Karen language since September 2014, my own language was not sufficient to investigate the meaning of weaving. I relied on translators to introduce me to local weaving communities, present my questions, and relate the answers back to me. In addition, the barrier was made greater when I was informed that the weavers at one Karen weaving site were not in fact Karen. At this site, my Karen staff member translated my questions into Burmese to be able to communicate with weavers who were ethnically Mon.⁸

Language proved to limit the research in other unforeseen ways. In English, the verb “to weave” is defined as the interlacing of threads, yarns, strips, or other fibrous material, so as to form a fabric or material. It can also mean to form by interlacing, such as in a basket (Weave, n.d., def. 1, 2.). Unbeknownst to me, the Karen language has two different words for this over/under interlacing process, *htah* and *htay*. My translators, conversations, and research were only using *htah*, the weaving of fabric, when my intention was not to limit the skill to a specific form or material.

Throughout the development, I kept a paper sketchbook. This served as a place to take notes on location, particularly during first-hand interviews with Karen weavers and other key members of Karen weaving projects. Occasionally, this meant surrendering my paper

⁸ The Mon people are one of the eight major ethnic groups of Burma, comprising 2% of the population in Burma. The Mon State, established in 1974, forms the western border of Karen State, Burma. Thailand, including Tak Province, forms the eastern border of Karen State (Mon, 2010, p. 40, 60; Central Intelligence Agency, 2015).

and pencil to the interviewee, allowing them to write in Karen within the sketchbook.⁹ I also recorded thoughts, feelings, impressions, questions, and reflections throughout the investigation. I used the pages to draw ideas for continued research and map curriculum concepts.

The form of sketchbook itself also proved to be part of the dialogue. Given to me as a birthday present, it is one of the products in the Chimmuwa line of goods made from Karen weavings. Having yet to use the sketchbook, I designated it for this purpose at the beginning of the interview process. While at the Partners Relief & Development weaving office, the staff noticed the outer covering of the sketchbook. They remarked on the design and produced items from their own line using the same traditional Karen weaving pattern.

Place-based education principles were the lens for collecting and analyzing the relevancy of data. First, what does weaving mean in the local culture? This is foundational for a place-based approach to curriculum. Second, what does it mean for an outsider to explore these meanings? How does my own cultural identity intersect with the local, both in coloring my understanding and expanding my affinities? For the purpose of this writing, I have chosen to tell these stories simultaneously. The meaning of Karen weaving is told in the narrow column. My own cultural insights are interwoven in italics.

⁹ There are multiple systems to transliterate from the Burmese script, used when writing Sgaw Karen language, to the Latin script. As much as possible, I used the Drum Publication Group's transliteration for my Romanization of names, places, and other Sgaw Karen words.

Delimitations

Throughout this study, I explored my identity as it changed in crossing borders physically, emotionally, culturally, and linguistically. I am an outsider who was attempting to develop a curriculum that values the understanding of the local, whereby “immersing (children) in local heritage” as a “springboard for studying regional, national, and global issues” (“Origins,” n.d.). Is it possible to create a place-based curriculum when you are not from that place?

In the autoethnography, I also analyzed how I developed a love for my new place, the Karen community, through this experience. What changed about my own cultural identity, my connections to the children, and my connections to the greater Karen community through the fieldwork in the local? By answering these questions, I attempted to “make characteristics of (the Karen) culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2011).

The local is itself in question when a people are displaced, as is the case for generations of Karen. Additionally, the name Karen is an umbrella term that some dispute “as a homogenous ethnic group due to a variation in religion, dialect, custom, and other characteristics” (Couch, Adonis, & MacLaren, 2011, p. 5). Karen people are generally divided into the primary groupings of Sgaw and Pwo based on the two major dialects, with many further sub-divisions within the Pan-Karen identity (Couch et al., 2011). Some claim that anyone can be Karen. Regardless of parental heritage, if one identifies as Karen, knows Karen culture and customs, and can speak a Karen language, they are Karen.

Many people whose parents come from other ethnic groups but who have grown up in Karen villages chose to identify as Karen, and are regarded as Karen by their communities. An example is a refugee who said, “My mother is ethnic Shan, my father is ethnic Burman, I was born in a Karen village and I am Karen.” (Moonieinda, 2011, p. 5)

Does this openness extend to the *gaw la wah*, a White foreigner who only speaks some of the language? Would they let me in to the knowledge of their culture and customs? Could I create resources to teach the Karen children about themselves?

As the time period of my life as a *gaw la wah* along the Thai-Burma border is indefinite, my personal autoethnographic journey has no foreseen endpoint. Yet for the purpose of this study, I delimited the fieldwork to the months of October 2015 through March 2016. The planned interviews took place in October and November; life experiences in the following four months also are included in the analysis of fieldwork. The process of action research and the resulting learning changed what I noticed and how I perceived it, giving me a new lens as I viewed cultural crossings in my daily life.

CHAPTER 4

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY INTO KAREN WEAVING

Despite Karen weaving's strong ties within the cultural identity of the Karen people, it has a relatively undocumented tradition. As I journeyed into the meaning of weaving in the Karen culture, I investigated both the products and the process. Yet weaving is more than the physical. I also examined the interwoven connections of the Karen culture in changing global times and the impact of weaving on relationships. Within each of these four subcategories, I analyzed how my own cultural identity intersects with the local in an autoethnographic tale. These stories are interwoven, with the meaning of Karen weaving told in the narrow column and my own cultural insights in italics.

Woven – the product

Hsuh Ghay Paw was recruited by Partners Relief and Development to head the weaving program nearly 20 years ago. She provided a simple explanation for why the Karen people weave. They “don’t have machine and they weave their own clothes.” It was practical; they needed garments to cover the body. In her village during this time, they did not have access to premade cloth, mass-produced clothing, or sewing machines. The backstrap loom and hand-sewing was all that was needed to clothe themselves.

This clothing of the body varies from culture to culture, but the desire to protect and present oneself through clothing transcends cultural lines. In the Karen culture, weaving is intrinsically tied to gender. Color and pattern of woven garments designate gender and life stage. Traditionally, men wear red shirts before and after marriage, woven with vertical stripes. This is paired with a sarong, sewn into a tube and tied in the middle, though dark pants have also found their way into the modern wardrobe. Women, on the other hand, wear horizontal stripes. Prior to marriage, the *say moh wah*, a long white dress, signifies purity. It typically has horizontal bands of decoration and long tassels. After marriage, a woman is to wear black and red in the form of a blouse and a sarong, not a single-piece dress. Women tuck their tube-shaped sarongs on the side, creating the look of a wrap skirt, not the center pleat of the male sarong.



Figure 1. Children and staff at Blessed Homes pose for a picture. The girls wear the *say moh wah*, a long white dress, and the boys are wearing Karen shirts of vertical stripes paired with shorts or pants. Photo Credit: Mary Moo Tay.



Figure 2. (left) Two female staff from Blessed Homes model the Karen blouse and sarong for women. They fold and tuck their sarong on the side, per the female convention. Though these two-piece sets are traditionally worn by married women, unmarried Karen women such as these staff members are rapidly switching to this style in contemporary Karen culture. Photo Credit: Mary Moo Tay.

Figure 3. (right) Two boys from Blessed Homes pose for a picture. They wear the traditional Karen sarong, folded and tied in the center according to the male convention., and paired with teeshirts. Photo Credit: Mary Moo Tay.

Like on the *say moh wah*, tassels of varying lengths are found on Karen traditional clothes. Not merely decorative, Hsuh Ghay Paw explained their practicality; in an emergency, they can be used as a jungle tunicate.

Among the two largest divisions of Karen, Sgaw and Pwo, the decoration on clothing varies. According to Hsuh Ghay Paw, Pwo Karen wear snipped shoulders and have designs along the top of the shirt. Sgaw Karen place their designs along the bottom. Hsuh Ghay Paw also mentioned that Burmese-Karen and those who recently have crossed the border have copied designs from the Thai-Karen. She did not elaborate on which components.



Figure 4. (left) Pwo Karen blouses are noted for designs along the top and shoulders. This model wears a set available for purchase online from www.KarenProducts.com, with worldwide shipping options. Photo Credit: Karen Products Shop.

Figure 5. (right) Sgaw Karen blouses for women are marked by horizontal stripes along the bottom. This model wears a set available for purchase online from www.KarenProducts.com, with worldwide shipping options. Photo Credit: Karen Products Shop.

In previous generations, specific weaving patterns and styles were bound by geographic lines. In the north, the Sgaw women used more elaborate decorations than the Sgaw women in Tak province. Pwo Karen traditional dress in Mae Sariang is more colorful than near Chiang Mai (Web Sawadee Public Company Limited, n.d., para. 16). As the Partners weaving project travels to different villages, they find the

knowledge to weave certain patterns varies from village to village. Designs might travel through inter-village marriages or gifts from relatives in another village (Otaka, 2008, p. 13). These distinctions are starting to blur more rapidly through modern migration and technological connection; what was once unique to isolated villages is quickly spreading.

Design options have also expanded through the use of the floor loom, as opposed to the traditional backstrap process. The floor loom allows for the creation of wider panels of fabric and different patterning. These days, some weavers are taking the designs introduced by the floor loom and replicating the patterns on their backstrap loom weavings.



Figure 6. (left) A staff member at Blessed Homes in Mae Oo Ho, Thailand, weaves with a backstrap loom during her free time. Photo credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

Figure 7. (right) A Mon woman is employed in Mu Lu Hsah, Thailand, as a weaver of Karen fabric. She uses a floor loom. Photo credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

The use of the floor loom has led to a small modification in the blouse and dress construction of Karen traditional clothes. The male and female pieces, despite their different striping, have the same construction. When using panels from a backstrap loom, two narrow rectangles sewn together along the long edges, leaving an opening in the middle for the neck and head. Then combined piece is then folded perpendicular to the seam, creating the shoulder. The individual panels are then sewn to themselves, binding together the left and right sides under the armpits. As with the hole for the head, a portion on either side is left unsewn for the armholes. When using wider panels from a floor loom, the blouse can be done in one piece,

with no need to stitch together two narrow panels. Instead, a slice is made coming down from the shoulder fold. This opening is then sewn with trimming to prevent fraying. There is no need to have a center seam continuing down from the neckline, though some may embroider a design to mimic this seam. Using either technique, the result is a rather square garment, equal in width at the top, middle, and bottom. When put on the body, the slice for the head widens to create a V-neck. Though it is a sleeveless design, the shoulder pieces overhang and drape down, leaving the shoulder covered and creating the illusion of a short-sleeve. The design has no front or back, but could work in either direction.

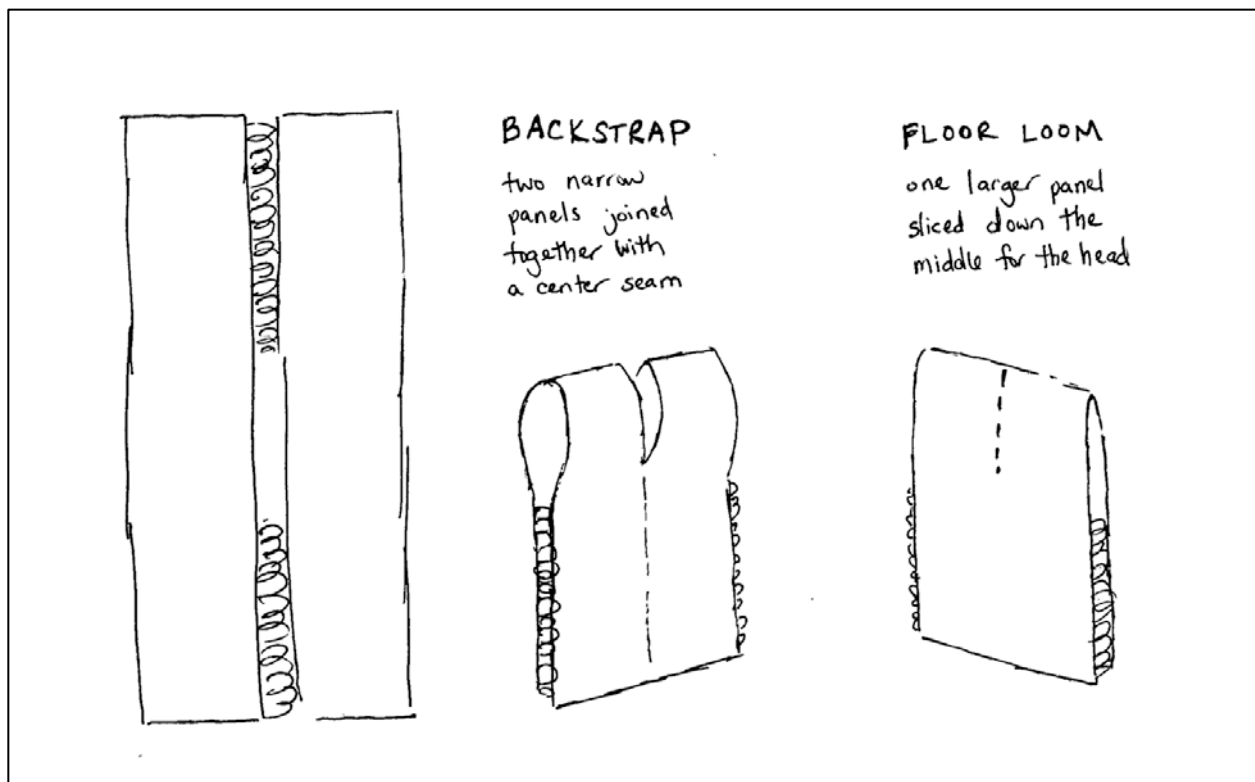


Figure 8. The construction of Karen blouses varies slightly depending on whether the panels are narrow, as woven on a backstrap loom, or wider from a floor loom. In the former, two panels are necessary to create the full

width. The resulting blouse has a center seam in the front and back. The later is sliced down the middle to create an opening for the head, with seams only necessary on the left and right sides, under the armpit. Illustration Credit: Stephanie Melachrinou.

Prior to this research, I was familiar with the form of Karen traditional clothes, but had little knowledge of the meaning. If you had shown me a blouse, would I have known if it was male or female? I think I would have known the difference, having seen it for over a year, but it took someone explicitly telling me “men have vertical stripes and women horizontal” for the convention to be made concrete in my mind. It fit with my unconscious observations from the past year, putting words to what I’d seen.

Mary, my coworker at Blessed Homes and translator for the interviews, mentioned this formal difference on the night before we went to a nearby village of Mu Lu Hsah to interview weavers. I had been to this site a few months prior, as one of our staff members was buying traditional clothes for her wedding. As we planned for the next day’s events, I was surprised to find out that the weavers were not Karen. This led to a greater language limitation, as Mary spoke Burmese with them; my Karen is limited but my Burmese is non-existent.

Some of our children came along for the research, turning this expedition into a mini-field trip. At the end of the interviews at the first weaving site, we began looking through the stash of garments available for immediate purchase. One weaver was helping our small children find items as our staff were looking at the larger sizes with the teens. With my recently formulated gender conventions, I could see the problem. The weaver was deceived by our buzz-cut, tomboy six year old; she was offering vertical stripes to Shee Shee Wah. I knew the

issue but with no language skills, was unable to explain. It took a few minutes for our staff to make the correction. Yet despite the inability to communicate in Burmese, I felt privileged to be an insider to this Karen gender convention. Only one day before, I might not have understood the situation.

Eventually, we found appropriate garments for the small children on the field trip. All three items were light pink, but the striping was gender-specific. It struck me that color does not contain the same gender-markings to the Karen as it does in my own culture.



Figure 9. The children from Blessed Homes model their new Karen clothing, purchased on the informal field trip to Mu Lu Hsah. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrininos.

Only four months prior, I was at a second-hand shop in my hometown of Collegeville, Pennsylvania. I remarked to my mother that I would love to buy a Bumbo child seat to bring back to Thailand for our baby. The saleswoman overheard and mentioned she had just added one to their inventory on the day prior. It was meant to be, but I had to take a second-thought. The Bumbo she produced was light pink; Ba Blu Htoo was a little boy. I knew it didn't matter but in those moments, I wished it to be almost any other color. It seemed wrong. I was

disappointed but I bought it anyway and brought it back for him. In Thailand, no one cared or commented. Pink is completely acceptable for both genders, though vertical stripes are not.

Three days after the trip to Mu Lu Hsah, a neighbor came over with a rice bag full of traditional clothes for sale. The young boys shirts were light pink. We put one on Ba Blu Htoo and took pictures – the little boy in his pink (vertical striped) shirt sitting in his pink chair.



Figure 10. Ba Blu Htoo, a child at Blessed Homes, sits in his pink Bumbo. He models a pink Karen shirt for boys.

Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinos.

This gender-signifying knowledge was applied one month later, on a trip to Chiang Mai. Friends visiting from the United States wanted to ride elephants. We went to a location outside of town run by a Thai man. As I looked at the clothing of people traveling to and from church on Sunday morning, it seemed to me that we were in a Karen village. I also guessed his

staff to be Karen so I slipped some Karen comments to them as we hiked down from the road to the complex.

Upon arrival, we were given a quick overview of the day and handed Karen shirts to wear. Red shirts with vertical stripes. I knew the issue but went along with the costume.



Figure 11. Foreign tourists, including two female friends and myself, are wearing Karen men's shirts while riding elephants in Thailand. All tourists, regardless of gender, were given shirts with vertical stripes to wear while at this elephant training center. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

When we went back out with the staff, the language exchange continued as more became privy to my understanding. I joked with the all-male staff about the shirts for myself and my two female friends. I wasn't just any tourist, but one with insider knowledge. In the end, I

received a marriage proposal from the first man with whom I spoke Karen. The other staff were quick to tell me that he already had two wives and four children. I turned down his offer to stay in the village with him and instead went back to Chiang Mai at the end of the program, leaving the red shirt with vertical stripes for the next batch of tourists.

Woven – the process

Like the wearing of Karen clothing, the process of weaving is a particularly gendered performance. Paw Law, a resettled Karen woman in a study by Smith, Stephenson, and Gibson-Satterthwaite, was told by her grandmother that to be a Karen woman, one must weave. It was “her responsibility, as a Karen woman, to acquire this skill and to pass the skill of weaving on to the next generation” (2013, p. 28). Hsuh Ghay Paw, of Partner’s Relief and Development, felt this pressure as well. With a childhood disrupted by the death of both parents and the poverty of her foster parents, she did not learn as a young woman. Others learned at the age of 8, 9, or 10, practicing on banana leaves before moving to thread. Her foster parents had no money for thread. Hsuh Ghay Paw remembers back to her days at Bible school in Chiang Mai, when all her friends could weave. “All people can weave. Only me cannot. So I learn while in Chiang Mai.” Her husband, whom she met during these same years of Bible school, came from a family where all the women wove. When Hsuh Ghay Paw joined work at Partners Relief and Development nearly 20 years ago to head up their new weaving project, she started with her husband’s home village.



Figure 12. (left) When I sat to make a sample weaving using banana leaves, some of the children of Blessed Homes watched, wondering what I was doing. After a few minutes, they joined in, tearing a banana leaf into strips and making their own weavings. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

Figure 13. (right) Detail of weaving sample that I made using portions of a banana leaf. Woven section is approximately 10 cm by 12 cm. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

In China, I taught students to weave on construction paper. As I first considered possibilities for a weaving curriculum, I noticed a stack of felt, donated to me by my colleague at my former school. The felt would be sturdier than strips of paper and at the same time, more flexible. It seemed to me that it would be a great way to practice weaving without frustration over ripped looms or folds in the weft strips.

Hsuh Ghay Paw's story of bamboo leaves hit me to the core. The resources here are abundant if I only take the time to look and listen. The Karen do not need mass-produced, chemically-

dyed, synthetic felt to learn to weave. They do not need hand-me-downs from outsiders and donations from abroad. In a place-based curriculum, we would utilize local knowledge and local resources. Banana leaves have been the stuff of play and learning for generations of children; it would be not only sufficient, but ideal for such a formalized curriculum.



Figure 14. One of the children at Blessed Homes creates "hair extensions" using shredded banana leaves. The leaves tear into neat strips that children repurpose as toys. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

What of the children at Blessed Homes? Their traditional familial structures are also disrupted. On my trip to interview weavers at Mu Lu Hsah, some children came along. As we sat and socialized with former staff members, now working at a Karen sewing project, my coworker and translator Mary stated it strongly; the teenagers must learn to weave. Our female staff know this skill, but they have not passed it along to the girls. “They are so old. They need to learn to weave. When they have time, they watch movies,” Mary lamented. As it was a school holiday, the possibility of coming for a one-week apprenticeship was discussed, though plans did not materialize. Five months later, at the end of the school year, the girls returned to this concept and began learning to weave, as taught by Mary and the other female staff.



Figure 15. (left) Teens, staff, and children from Blessed Homes walk in the village of Mu Lu Hsah, Thailand, to the Karen weaving site. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinou.

Figure 16. (right) One of the teens from Blessed Homes prepares thread for weaving lessons during the Thai public school holiday. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

Although some of the Mon weavers, producing Karen clothing, were men, by and large Karen weavers are women. Yet the skill of weaving, to interlace so as to form a fabric or material, is not kept from Karen men. In fact, Karen men are very skilled with bamboo and other fibrous materials, interlacing them to make baskets, animal cages, and mats. “In Karen tradition, men produce elaborate bamboo crafts such as chicken cages, baskets, and house walls, and women create outstanding textile art” (Otaka, 2008, p. 5). Linguistically, this is not the same verb. In the Karen language, to weave fabric is *htah* and to weave these other items is *htay*. These two making verbs are specific to the form and material. They are also bound by cultural gender expectations. In busy times, such as harvest, a woman will help on the farm, in the jungle, and with animals, so she will likely know how to weave items useful in these contexts. A male is less likely to weave fabric. The techniques unique to thread woven on a backstrap loom are not necessarily taught to Karen men.

As I prepared for the visit to Mu Lu Hsah, my coworker and translator Mary told me of a weaving project in our own village. Some women gather to weave up the road, near the church. Mary agreed to take me, but every time we walked by, the women were busy in the field.

The following month, when meeting at the Partners office, Hsuh Ghay Paw spoke of this dynamic. She told me that women work much more than men. They must be available to do all aspects of work in the home and the field. "Men are not like that" and are not expected to do things like weave clothing.

During this discussion, the Partners staff assumed I had seen backstrap weaving in person. My director was also shocked that I had never seen it, as he felt like it was an incredibly common sight in his first years in Thailand. I was able to watch a video from Partners to see the set-up but it wasn't until four months later that I saw it in person. On a random morning, I walked out of the room at our home in Mae Oo Ho and found one of the new staff weaving! To my delight, I was able to watch her and take pictures. Since then, I've also seen Mary's mother weaving using the same backstrap loom.

Apart from the Mon weavers, I continually came across the weaving of textiles as bound by gender lines. It was during the meeting at Partners that Hsuh Ghay Paw mentioned typically-male tasks such as making baskets to carry babies, cages for chickens, and buildings. These are considered non-loom weaving according to my cultural-linguistic filter; I would use the verb "to weave" for both textiles and other non-thread weaving. In Sgaw Karen, it is not so. A simple translation exercise led to the discovery that htah and htay are different verbs in Karen, denoting the form and material being interlaced, and with gender implications.

With this new knowledge of gender associations, I went back to the literature review. I could only find one mention of men. In Portland, Oregon, Weaving Together modified the big bags

and tassels deemed masculine by Karen men to fit their local Portland clientele (Parks, 2014). Every other mention of gender in the literature review was confined to women. Every gendered reference to a weaver was female. Even the names of the organizations – Pee Pee, Chimmuwa, and WEAVE – were gendered.¹⁰ The tourist agencies did not seem to limit their customers by gender, but wrote, “Karen women are proud of their traditional Karen weaving techniques and they present a huge part of Karen culture” (emphasis added, Samart, n.d., para. 1). The description continued, “weaving is central to the Karen culture as a whole” (Samart, n.d., para. 1). What does it mean to pass this aspect of culture to a generation of boys and girls at Blessed Homes? When I consider a place-based curriculum, it would expose both genders to htah and htah, while giving them the agency to explore and create in either domain, as they see fit.

Interwoven – the changing times

Hsuh Ghay Paw tied Karen weaving to necessity. Yet in modern times, weaving one’s own covering is no longer required. “Now, most children wear T-shirts and trousers in their daily lives because women find it easier to buy clothes than to make them” (Otaka, 2008, p. 8). It is not uncommon to see Ben-10, Marvel Superheroes, and Disney Princesses on children in a Karen village. Traditional clothes are now becoming formal wear, reserved for special occasions. This typically includes religious gatherings and family celebrations.

¹⁰ Pee Pee is the word for grandmother in Sgaw Karen. Chimmuwa is the name of the white dress worn by girls and unmarried women also transliterated as *say moh wah*. WEAVE is an acronym for Women’s Education for Advancement and Empowerment.

When Karen people don their ethnic clothing, it is often purchased. As villages modernize, full of smart phones and automobiles, the making process has also changed. It is no longer necessary to grow, spin, and dye cotton for oneself. Ready-made thread, dyed in traditional or new colors, is available in the village. A woman who wants to weave only needs to walk down the road to purchase thread in an array of colors. The mass-production of thread, especially using chemical dyes, widened the color palette and loosened the color requirements and connotations for stage of life. Even the *say moh wah*, with the color white (*wah*) in its name, is now produced for young girls in a plethora of colors. It is also common to purchase finished garments, requiring no making from the individual, but only the act of wearing.



Figure 17. Commercially-produced weaving thread available for purchase at a small shop in the village of Tha Song Yang, Thailand. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

As I sat at Noh Bo Academy's¹¹ graduation ceremony, I was unable to decipher the Karen projected through muffled microphones and speaker system. Instead, I found myself drawn to the friends and family, attending to watch their loved one graduate. I began counting the colors and styles. Purple, cornflower blue, tiffany blue, royal blue, white, light pink, black, turquoise, navy, deep emerald, olive green, red, hot pink, dusty pink, periwinkle, grey – these were the colors of the women. The men also had a diverse offering. Other than the standard red top, I saw a deep sea foam

¹¹ Noh Bo Academy is not part of the Thai public school system. The school programming is offered in Karen for dorm students from Burma and village students from Noh Bo.

green, bright sea foam green, dark brown, tan, orange, light dusty red, coral, and kelly green. The two pastors, seated on the platform, both wore red tops with Western dress shirts underneath. From my seat in the audience, I could only see one traditional white *say moh wah*. I saw five women wearing a two-piece set, with white shoulders and a colored bodice on the blouse, paired with a sarong of the same color. This was the same style that I modeled when our neighbor came selling clothes. Two other women wore a style I had never seen before, even on websites. This glocal fusion was not a typically-western silhouette, but was modeled after the Chinese *qipao*. The blouses had mandarin collars, wrap v-necks, and pieced sleeves. Very few of the traditionally-shaped blouses had the center seam down the front and back, denoting fabric woven on a backstrap loom. Most were made on a floor loom, which likely means the tops were purchased.

Karen clothing is also worn as part of the school uniform in many Karen villages. Though the schools are public Thai schools, the curriculum is Thai, and the teachers are Thai, many of these villages have one day of the week in which a Karen shirt is the uniform. Otaka writes of external forces inflicting change on the culture. The Thai school she observed in Hpaungauhki requires “ ‘traditional costumes’ every Friday. However, ‘traditional costumes’ are defined as ‘blouses and skirts or trousers,’” excluding the *say moh wah* (2008, p. 8). Now young girls have begun wearing blouses, which were previously reserved for married women. Otaka postulates that “this school rule may accelerate the vanishing of Karen single women’s dress,” but I have observed that the Thai school in Mae Oo Ho allows girls

to wear a one-piece dress. Additionally, while the school in Mae Oo Ho follows the Hpaungauhki format of “traditional costume” on Fridays, the Thai school in Noh Bo has selected Tuesdays as the appropriate day for this uniform. It seems that there is a degree of flexibility for the local school to define the uniform for each day as they see fit.



Figure 18. (left) One of the children of Blessed Homes in Noh Bo, Thailand, dresses in his Wednesday uniform for Thai public school. This uniform is referred to as “King’s Scouts.” There is a different uniform for each day of the week. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

Figure 19. (right) The children of Blessed Homes in Mae Oo Ho, Thailand, pose for a picture in their Wednesday uniform before heading to Thai public school. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

The very notion of *tradition* is one that demands a look. Otaka writes that “villagers do not recognize the significance of their own culture, which is vanishing under the influence of Thai and other dominant cultures,” textiles being no exception (2008, p. 7). Is the culture vanishing, or is the tradition evolving? When considering the

meaning of weaving within this place, we must recognize that cultures change; life does not remain stagnant.

This is especially true as Karen people navigate the self within an uncertain concept of place. Life in Karen state, refugee camps in Thailand, border towns in Thailand, and third countries are vastly different. As individuals and a culture, there is a response to the change of place and the (new) local. For Paw Law, weaving is a mechanism to rehearse the past and make sense of the current. It ties her to her grandmother, to the camp where she learned to weave, and to generations of stylistic conventions. Yet in a creative negotiation, she does not hold firm to a nostalgic sense of tradition. Instead, she finds meaning in designing Americanized items, performing her Karen culture within a new place and defining a new identity for herself and other resettled Karen.

What is to be said of tradition? As I read the narrative, be it work of Otaka or my own friend, an ethnomusicologist preparing to come to Thailand to study the traditional music of the Karen, there is a call to purity. To authenticity in tradition.

We may be ashamed of the white-washing done by our imperialistic ancestors, but are we not imposing these same sentiments of superiority when we demand they remain bound by ancient conventions? Our cultures have changed; why should theirs be required to exist in a nostalgic vacuum of time? If we truly value them as human-beings, we would not just honor

their traditions and seek to document the culture, but also allow the Karen autonomy and agency to determine the future of their culture in a global world.

Will their choices make them Karen? I have never worn a petticoat, but I am still rooted in European-American culture. I am not asked to wear the styles of 50, 100, or 150 years ago, apart from Colonial day in elementary school, when we were asked to rehearse the story of previous generations. At the same time, I have been given the opportunity to take on elements from other cultures, as I have redefined myself through the myriad of places that have been my local. The Karen culture is taking a similar route, saving traditional dress for days of specific performance and incorporating elements from every place in which they interact. When we as outsiders impose judgment, valuing an invented history wherein their tradition remains untouched by changing times, we relegate them to a display at Epcot. It is still imperialism, a hierarchy in which we know what is best for them and their culture. What it means to be Karen will change over time, but that is the natural course for all cultures.

Hsuh Ghay Paw recognizes the evolution of her people. “Now everything has changed. High class. Culture is high.” A woman of 53 years, she is not offended by the altering of tradition.

Historically, weaving was part of the preparation for marriage. For years, mothers prepared clothing, bags, and blankets as gifts for their daughters and future daughters-in-law. Likewise, girls weave clothing and bags to be given as gifts at their

own wedding (Otaka, 2008, p. 9). An American friend, who has lived in Thailand for 35 years, attended weddings in which the bride gave a woven bag to every guest. This bag contained a bottle of Coke, which is clearly a recent addition to the culture. In the past, a young woman had to work for months to weave all the items needed for her wedding. Now she can travel a few kilometers to find the items for sale at a Karen shop, coming home with a stack of bags ready to be distributed.

At Karen textile shops, it is common to find Karen woven fabric sewn into new forms. I know of six shops in my area, though there are likely many more. Online shops are also prevalent. KarenProducts.com has one tab for “traditional dress” and another for “fashion clothings,” where the items are constructed of Karen textiles, cut and pieced together into new silhouettes. At church or other Christian celebrations, it is common to see the pastor forsake the blouse of previous generations for a suit coat. But while the suit coat form mirrors Western styles, the fabric is not black, navy or grey. Vibrant colors, woven into Karen patterns, are cut, fragmented, rearranged, and assembled as a collage. Garments may also include fabrics sourced from other traditions: lace, chiffon, or poly-cotton. My coworker’s groom wore a lilac coat for his wedding, and Eh Luh Tha wore a dress with a form-fitting purple bodice and layers of lace for the skirt and puff shoulders. She was very particular about the silhouette she desired. We made an emergency trip to a fabric store one hour away to purchase additional lace and embellishments so the seamstress could finish it to her satisfaction. Eh Luh Tha also purchased purple

dress in the glocal fusion fashion for her many bridesmaids and aqua say moh wah for other important young women at her ceremony.



Figure 20. (left) Eh Luh Tha and Brian pose for a picture with two _____. Eh Luh Tha custom-ordered her dress and the matching suit coat for Brian. Photo Credit: Unknown (wedding attendee).



Figure 21. (right) Eh Luh Tha poses for a picture with some members of her bridal party. Photo Credit: Unknown (wedding attendee).

There are a few key events in life, times when it is an extreme honor to be let into someone's most sacred moments. Birth, death, and marriage are three. To walk alongside Eh Luh Tha in her wedding preparation was a privilege. But the trip to Mu Lu Hsah was a disappointment. They hadn't been able to contact her and didn't think she was coming back for the say moh wah. Since they sold them, Eh Luh Tha would have to order more and wait a few weeks. Then we went up the road to Thoo Mweh Khee. Her own dress was being made by a seamstress in that village. When I saw her reaction to the dress, I had to do everything in my power to correct the situation. It was not what she dreamed for her walk down the aisle. Where was the

puff of a full skirt? The seamstress explained that the fabric was not enough. It was settled; on the next day, we would drive one hour north, to the big town of Mae Sot, to purchase more.



Figure 22 (left) Eh Luh Tha, her sister, and other staff members from Blessed Homes look through stacks of colored *say moh wah* dresses in Mu Lu Hsah, Thailand. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.



Figure 23. (right) Eh Luh Tha and her sister examine the bridal party dresses being made in Thoo Mweh Khee, Thailand. They determined the dresses needed to be puffier and needed more lace and other adornments so a shopping trip was needed to purchase more supplies for the seamstress. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

I posted on Instagram about our adventures. Friends asked to see the dress. I replied privately. Despite my enthusiasm and my utmost support for Eh Luh Tha, I could not deny my personal aesthetic. Her dress, and the dresses of the bridesmaids, looked like oversize princess dresses from a little girl's dress-up box. Lilac, lavender, bows, lace, and puff. A 1980's prom dress, but made more eclectic with zigzag patterns in an assortment of pastel colors. Is this their interpretation of fashion from my culture?

As someone connected to the arts, I have very strong opinions about style. I've been defining and refining my own style for years. I am attracted to many things in the world of Karen textiles, but the color choice, embellishments, and pairings are how I judge items as either lovely and sophisticated or awkward, childish, and incongruent.

By and large, Karen love color. Bright colors. And in any combinations. Pastel pink, light purple, and mint green are not colors I would expect on the suit coat of a male leader, yet this is the dress of a modern Karen pastor. The red tunic, paired with dark pants, seems more suitable in my eyes for a person of his position.

Likewise, when choosing colors to paint our boys houses at the home in Noh Bo, I joked that I would use the Disney Princess brand as inspiration, with one leading lady for each of the six houses. Belle's building would be yellow. Pastel blue for Cinderella. Pink for Sleeping Beauty. But in fact, they would probably have preferred such a pastel rainbow to the nature-inspired shades of green that I selected.

When it comes to color, the Karen do not have gender connotations and more is always better. I struggle not to impose words of judgment on this. To call the style unsophisticated. At my previous teaching site, I stressed color schemes and asked children to make self-limiting choices; I do not think that would be appropriate in a place-based curriculum for Karen children.

As Karen are embracing additional forms for their fabric, so are groups looking to sell to non-Karen audiences. Intertwine, the project of Partners Relief and Development, markets their items to outsiders. “(Karen) culture and art is the story. The distinctive style of weaving, with its colourful patterns and designs, will be a unique addition to your personal style” (n.d., para. 2). At the project, Hsuh Ghay Paw is the judge of weaving quality while Dorothy, an American, and some of her non-Karen, non-Thai coworkers give input about color combinations and styles. They provide the thread to the women weavers in the village, asking them to make panels of specific sizes using specific color combinations. Occasionally, the women pair remnants together and the Intertwine staff are surprised by the offerings when they come to collect the panels. The fabric is then brought to the Intertwine office. Like the Karen-for-Karen fusion, new forms are pieced together with other items: zippers, clasps, leather, etc.. Currently, the goods are available online and in their Chiang Mai office.

One might be critical of this inauthentic use by an outsider. To market this for a non-Karen audience. Does it trivialize the culture when you pick and choose to create your own look? But the Karen I have met are not tied to authenticity the way Otaka and others write. To see their craft travel is to see an appreciation of who they are. Additionally, the greater market for goods gives them personal dignity. They do not need to rely on handouts or go without food. Weaving projects, like that of Partners, gives them work to do when not farming. Weaving has transformed from subsistence living in their culture to a source of supplemental income; it is

empowering. Jaa Dee, from Naklang Nua village, told the Intertwine staff “I’m so very happy because I am able to help and get paid. Now I can buy laundry soap and thread to work on my own clothes. I don’t have to borrow anymore, and I don’t have to worry.” Sang Jan, another weaver from Naklang Nua, said, “Now I’m able to provide for my children the life that I never had. We are very happy Partners brought this job to us so we don’t have to worry about what we eat. It makes me feel free.” In a global economy, it is only fitting that the Karen would benefit from interconnected markets, while preserving the skills and techniques of their weaving culture.

And yet Karen are not confined to the employee end of the corporate ladder. The weaving site in Mu Lu Hsah was founded fifteen or sixteen years ago by a rich Karen woman. Her workers, 32 including the children living on site with their parents, are ethnic Mon from Burma. Kay Moh has been working at Mu Lu Hsah for a year and a half. Her husband’s mother came first, which is how Kay Moh learned of the job opportunity. It takes one day to travel back to her village in Burma. She doesn’t know how to weave her own traditional clothes, but remarked that Karen clothes were easier. She won’t wear them, though, because they are too hot. Perhaps she would consider it in the coldest months, such as December and January. In all, she said her people come because they don’t have a job, and this is a job they like. There is enough work and comfortable pay. They are able to support family back in Burma, sending money to their parents and helping to pay school tuition for their siblings.



Figure 24. Kay Moh, a Mon woman working as a weaver in Mu Lu Hsah, Thailand, helps dress one of the children from Blessed Homes in a *say moh wah*. Other Blessed Homes staff and teens look through stacks of available woven garments. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

For all the words I held back when viewing the Karen-for-Karen items, I overflowed with joy when seeing the designs of Intertwine. The line is gorgeous. The colors are incredible, and paired simply but beautifully. When I visited the office to meet with the staff, I gushed in praise, walking away with many items in my hands and much less money in my wallet. Intertwine is well-branded, complete with tags and a website that bears little resemblance to KarenProducts.com.

These strong feelings are me. Like culture, my own style evolves, and has incorporated many Karen elements, though I am still highly influenced by my roots. These filters are not wrong, but must be negotiated when crossing cultures and building relationships with people that have other aesthetic priorities.

Interwoven – the relationships

Though weaving may seem to be a solitary activity, it is a place of connection for Karen women. Hsuh Ghay Paw talked of village women traveling into the jungle together, taking time and a quiet space to dye their thread. In third countries, resettled women gather together to weave and remember the place from which they came (Smith et al., 2013). Through the giving of finished works, they also connect. Otake writes “Women exchange their beliefs quietly through their blouses and skirts. It is through these hand-made gifts that women develop their larger networks beyond Hpaugauhki village” (2008, p. 15). And through the teaching of the skill, generations are brought together, the elder to mentor the younger.

For our group at Blessed Homes, this research was a space of connection. I relied upon Mary, my coworker, to be my translator and guide. Long after the dedicated days of investigation, I sent her quick messages of clarification. “Is there a front/back to a Karen shirt, or can you wear it either way?” I also asked questions of Eh Luh Tha and Ga Neh, wondering about Karen verbs and wanting confirmation of

the day of the week that our Noh Bo children wear Karen shirts as their Thai school uniform.

On the day set aside for interviewing weavers in Mu Lu Hsah, another staff member and six children joined, turning our journey into an informal field trip. In awe, the children watched the weavers on the floor looms. I asked my questions of the weavers, despite the awkwardness of my request. Kay Moh was the main one to tell her story, but she consulted with five other women, all sitting around, drinking coffee and looking at their phones. The conversation continued long after my questions ended. Unable to understand, I asked Mary to enlighten me. This gathering of women, Mon weavers and my Karen coworkers, were talking about the “truth in Burma.” In less than a month, there would be the first election in 25 years. They all wondered what would happen.



Figure 25. Mary, my Karen translator and staff at Blessed Homes, sits in the midst of five Mon women who work weaving Karen traditional clothing in the border village of Mu Lu Hsah, Thailand. The six women speak to each other in Burmese. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

After visiting the Mon people weaving Karen clothing, we went down the street to another home. Maria and Toria, sisters and my former coworkers, now produce bags sewn from Karen woven fabric. They live on site in Mu Lu Hsah, and their boss sells these items at a store in Phop Phra, at stores in the refugee camps, and to third countries via an online shop. It was a welcome reception filled with hugs, as all the children and adults were happy to be reunited. We talked of our director and of the baby who had been sick.

There was much excitement over their bags. We looked at all the glocal fusion fashion styles, both works in process and finished pieces. They make twenty at a time, taking three days to bring the lot of items from start to finish. “They are beautiful, aren’t they?” Mary said to me. If she can ever find free time, she will come and stay for a few days with Maria and Toria. They will teach her to make the backpack design. Mary, ever the dreamer, talked of the new wooden house, planned to replace an old bamboo structure at the Mae Oo Ho home. The upstairs could have a weaving/sewing project.



Figure 26. Mary, my Karen translator and staff at Blessed Homes, tries her hand at sewing while the three employees take a break at the bag factory in Mu Lu Hsah, Thailand. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinis.

We finished the excursion with lunch at a noodle shop and ice cream from 7-11. When we got back to the home, Shee Shee Wah saw her older sister. “We got ice cream. You should have come!” I had to laugh because I also bought traditional clothes for the children who came along, but her priorities were the ice cream. The connection continued a few days later. Proudly wearing their new garments from our excursion, the children came by to give me hugs on their way to church.

Three days later, we were relaxing at the orphanage home when a neighbor came by. Naw Bleh Poh and her relative, Pee Bee, came with two rice bags full of

garments. They had purchased the clothes from the store in Thoo Mweh Khee on the previous week and were now going around the village, sitting to socialize with their neighbors and showing the items for sale. It was a Karen trunk show, and we all took turns trying on the traditional wear. Even Ba Blu Htoo, the baby, got dressed in a pink Karen shirt. As we modeled the garments, we talked, laughed, and shared stories, connecting around the clothing. In the end, all the new staff purchased items. I also purchased a new sarong. Then Naw Bleh Poh and Pee Bee carefully folded the remaining items, packed them in their two bags, left, and we each went back to our own business at the orphanage.

Connecting around clothing continued the next month, when I traveled to the Partners office in Chiang Mai. Through interviewing Dorothy and Hsuh Ghay Paw, I was given access into their deep friendship. The women have worked together for nearly ten years, traveling to villages for weaving projects. Even though they see each other at the office every week, my questions triggered a sharing of memories that brought smiles, laughter, and sweetness. They tried to remember names of places and people. Sometimes they could both remember stories but neither could remember the associated names. They talked of gifted sarongs and blouses. Hsuh Ghay Paw calls Dorothy “mommy,” though once in our meeting she called her Dorothy. It caught Dorothy by surprise, as she hasn’t heard her name from Hsuh Ghay Paw’s mouth for years. They laughed and laughed, wanting to tell me a funny story. The two women have a matching pair of pajama pants. One night, they were

sharing a room. After changing in pajamas, they looked at each other in shock. Were the pajama pants capris or long pants? Sure enough, they took off the pants and compared. The pants were the same length, but on Dorothy's long legs, they were capris. For Hsuh Ghay Paw, they were full-length!

The women also asked of my journey to Thailand and my research into Karen weaving. I was able to teach them about Chimmuwa. They knew of the organization and wanted to connect with the staff but did not realize it was a Taiwanese-based group. We ended our time together with the sharing of lunch and an invitation to stay at Dorothy's house on my next trip to Chiang Mai.

Throughout the six months of fieldwork, I observed the interwoven relationships of others, bonded around the loom and its woven gifts. I was given privilege not just into their Karen culture but also their relationships, some of which had existed for decades. In a dynamic weaving, I was also added as a fiber in the cloth. My own life, stories, and culture was revealed and intertwined with their own.

CHAPTER 5
WEAVING BORDER CROSSINGS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The dedicated time and research, seeking to understand this place and Karen culture through weaving, brought me deeper into relationship and connection with the kids and staff of Blessed Homes, along new acquaintances of Karen and other ethnicities. Yet in a twist of fate, through the deeper understanding of Karen culture, I was made more aware of the non-Karen portions of my identity.

Karen life, especially in the village, is spontaneous. Every plan is subject to change. I knew this cultural trait before beginning this action research project but the format of research and trying to impose a structure on life brought it to the surface. Planning days in advance, not to mention weeks or months, did not lead to any greater level of success. It only made me frustrated. I felt committed to the timeline and the Karen didn't find it any more compelling of an agreement than if we only discussed it moments prior. While the action research project focused my attention on weaving and created some specific interactions (the visit to Mu Lu Hsah, unsuccessful visits to the neighbor, and a visit to the Partners office), many other insightful moments came from unplanned life – a visit from a neighbor, a coworker weaving during her free time, or an online conversation.

This disconnect was felt beyond timetables. At the Karen shop in Thoo Mweh Khee, we purchased a pink say mo wah for Shee Shee Wah. Mary was disappointed with the price,

350 baht, as we had bought the boys' shirts at the weaving site for 180 each. I wanted Shee Wah to have something so I surrendered the money. As we left, the young ladies working at the shop began laughing. Was it awkward laughter because they were not used to foreigner customers, or was it because of the price they'd convinced me to pay? I'd felt this way before, when I bought chicken at the Burmese market. I later learned they'd charged me a 50% markup on the meat. Now in Thoo Mweh Khee, a day spent learning about Karen culture and journeying together with my coworkers and children had this sour note, which was only confirmed when Naw Bleh Poh told us she paid 280 for the same dress at that shop.

I am not unique in this dynamic. At the Partners office, Dorothy showed some fabric to Hsuh Ghay Paw. Two Americans had bought it on a recent trip to a southern area along the border. Hsuh Ghay Paw was able to identify the area from the design and believed it to be good quality, yet she was outraged by the price. At 1000 baht, she called it *farang*¹² price; 500 would be more appropriate. "She donate, not buy," Hsuh Ghay Paw remarked.

Throughout the research, I felt that I was getting it wrong. My understanding of when we would be going to Mu Lu Hsah, and who would be coming with us. My assumption that the people weaving Karen clothes in Mu Lu Hsah would themselves be Karen. My aversion to pink items for boys. My *farang/gaw la wah* price at the store in Thoo Mweh Khee. My attempts to connect and schedule with Partners in Chiang Mai. Even my inability to type a specific Karen letter on my Mac keyboard, which found us struggling for synonyms using

¹² Farang is the Thai word for White foreigner.

different letters. Over and over, I couldn't make things work. My natural understandings and assumptions were incorrect. But change, growth, and understanding of their culture is not possible if I do not recognize my own biases.

What does it mean for me to be here? What does it mean for me to don their clothes? Clothes the Karen are beginning to define as formal wear and relegate to special occasions. Clothes whose production they outsource and whose style is loosening from its rigid conventions. I feel true to myself and yet village-appropriate when I pair a maxi skirt purchased at The Loft with a fitted t-shirt. My knees are covered, and my shoulders as well. I am following their modesty conventions but wearing garments that are distinctly of my culture. Wearing a Karen sarong and blouse feels inauthentic. Have I earned the right to wear it? Am I playing dress-up in an Epcot world, trivializing their culture and appropriating without understanding? Tradition says I am to wear a long white *say moh wah*. Instead, I put on a sarong and a fitted t-shirt, or wear skinny jeans with my blue Karen blouse. Occasionally I put the two Karen pieces together. At one such occasion, I walked around the village of Klee Thoo Kloh, where we have another one of our homes. There was a large Karen conference, and I wandered throughout the crowd in my sarong and blouse. A coworker spotted me. "Wow, you look beautiful!" he exclaimed.



Figure 27. At the Blessed Homes Christmas celebration, I am singing a traditional song with five of the youth. Ble Ble is wearing a pink *say moh wah*. I am wearing a Karen blouse and sarong. The other youth in the singing ensemble are wearing Western-style clothing. Photo Credit: Ole-Jørgen Edna.

I didn't feel beautiful. I felt like I was wearing a shapeless, colorful potato sack. Already conscious of my larger body size, I felt the lack of a defined waist, the horizontal stripes across my larger-than-Karen chest, and the draping of the stomach only made me look larger. The form of the dress is not connected to the form of dress I feel is beautiful. The silhouette is not one taught in the fashion magazines I read as a teen or preached by Stacy and Clinton on TLC's *What Not to Wear*. This is the cultural lens through which I see myself when wearing Karen clothing.

It is not what this male coworker saw. It is also not what my female coworkers saw when Naw Bleh Poh brought her trunk sale to the home. To my surprise, she had garments large

enough to fit me so I joined in the fashion show. As I sheepishly emerged from the room in a matching ensemble, I was greeted by an overwhelmingly positive response. “These clothes are better for you, sister. Really, perfect, everything.” Mary concluded.

In America, I am self-conscious about my size; in Asia, I am even more so. But what I feel only accentuates the fat for which they tease me is a silhouette they embrace as attractive. To see me in clothes they treasure was not to steal or dishonor their culture but showed my affinity to their Karen identity. They grabbed their smartphones and took pictures of their *gaw la wah* friend.



Figure 28. (left) As I model Karen clothing available for purchase, the staff remark on my appearance and grab their smartphones to take pictures. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinos.

Figure 29. (right) Three of the staff at Blessed Homes also take turns modeling Karen clothing. This new take on the traditional form pairs a blouse sewn of white and color with a matching-colored sarong. These weavings are made on the floor loom and pieced together to make the final garments. Photo Credit: Stephanie Melachrinos.

Are the Karen losing their identity when they merge clothing traditions with new ideas? Do I lose my identity in the journey to connect with them? Is the White American of my childhood identity pushed out in a zero-sum culture, or does my understanding of self expand, revealing itself as multifaceted? I am comfortable in the blurring of traditions and defined boundaries. I believe there is richness here, and am eager to continue exploring it with my Karen friends, new and old.

The process of weaving is one in which you bind together different parts to create something greater. Even the fragmented, pieced-together, new style collage of Karen fashion is a merging of worlds and a natural outgrowth of culture in place and time.

My life is a collage; the kids' lives are a collage. As a family at Blessed Homes, we are not bound by one local, but influenced by Burma, Thailand, refugee camps, Norwegian leadership, European volunteers, and my own American culture. A weaving curriculum, though rooted in a place-based understanding of Karen culture, must acknowledge this blending. Like my own exploration, it will tune their eyes to see the role of weaving all around them. It will give them a place and space to create for themselves. And it will let them connect to a rich heritage, giving them the agency to perform their Karen identity and weave it together with the other manners in which they define and redefine themselves.

Action Research Recommendations

For the purpose of this study, I delimited the project to a study of my understanding of place through researching local weaving traditions for the design of a curriculum. The study did not analyze the completed curriculum, implementation of the curriculum, including its effectiveness on participants, or my own further cultural transformation through teaching. The study only analyzed my own cultural transformation through the research and writing of a place-based curriculum focusing on the meaning of weaving within the Karen culture.

Further research is needed to understand the meaning of *htay* weaving in the Karen culture, such as bamboo baskets, cages, and mats. These male-oriented weaving formats could then be incorporated in a broader approach to weaving in the place-based curriculum. Research may also investigate the implementation of a *htah/htay* curriculum on participants' notion of gender, including their affinity for the differing forms and what it means to them.

Another avenue of research is to analyze the cultural transformation of tradition within the glocal for Karen in Burma, in the camps, in greater Thailand (Thai-Karen and undocumented migrants), and those resettled in third countries.

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APPENDIX A: IRB EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

PENNSTATE



IRB Program
Office for Research Protections

Vice President for Research
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205 The 330 Building
University Park, PA 16802

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EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: September 14, 2015

From: Jodi Mathieu, IRB Analyst

To: Stephanie Melachrinou

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Weaving Border Crossings
Principal Investigator:	Stephanie Melachrinou
Study ID:	STUDY00003280
Submission ID:	STUDY00003280
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SNM150_InterviewQuestions.pdf (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument• SNM150_IRB_Proposal_2.pdf (2), Category: IRB Protocol

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

This correspondence should be maintained with your records.

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