

Constructing Cultural Identity Through Weaving Among Ri-Bhoi Women Weavers: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach

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Introduction and Literature: The Indian handloom industry provides employment and a source of livelihood to India's rural and semi-rural population (Government of India, 2015). The North Eastern Region of India (NERI) accounts for 61% of the total handloom workforce (Devi, 2013). NERI has the highest concentration of handloom units in India, with women dominating 99% of the adult workforce (Devi, 2013). Weaving is culturally significant to NERI women, with weaving skills and knowledge passed from mother to daughter (Devi, 2013). Research has focused on potential for growth and change in the NERI handloom industry (e.g., Devi, 2012; 2013; Ramswamy & Hmangaihuali, 2016), but little to no research has considered women weavers' perspectives or the way weaving shapes their lives and identities. As textile traditions may be intimately bound with the development of individual and community attitudes and beliefs and cultural identity (Gale & Kaur, 2002), the primary purpose of the present study was to understand how women handloom weavers develop a sense of cultural identity through weaving in the region of Ri-Bhoi, a district in the state of Meghalaya, in NERI. Cultural identity refers to a person's self-concept that evolves from one's role in the society, constituting values and beliefs that are shared among different members in that society (Tajfel, 1978). Symbolic interaction was adopted to consider ways in which interactions within the Ri-Bhoi cultural context contributed to meanings about the women's weaving activities and their cultural identities. In recent years, demand and sale of handloom products have grown domestically and internationally, drawing interest from organizations to upgrade and modernize the handloom industry (Government of India, 2015). Modernization of traditional textile industries may profoundly effect products as well as the social and cultural structure of the community (Scrase, 2003). Hence, this research also considered how modernization of the Ri-Bhoi handloom industry set a context for the development of women weavers' cultural identities through weaving?

Method: A qualitative, ethnographic approach utilizing grounded theory analytical techniques was adopted. Data were collected over 3 weeks, in 4 villages across Ri-Bhoi where weaving was prevalent, using participant observation, field notes/journaling, and 9 informal and 22 formal interviews. Participants were recruited based on their current engagement in weaving. Interviews were audio recorded in Khasi, the local language, with the aid of local translators, and later were translated into English and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were studied in-depth and grouped together under codes to identify overarching themes. Notes from field observation and journaling helped verify and validate the data extracted from the formal interviews.

Findings: Analyses revealed that participants' experiences were situated in the context of changes evidenced in the Ri-Bhoi handloom industry since the early 20th century, when Christian

missionaries converted many from their native religion to Christianity. The conversion led to the near demise of traditional weaving as most traditional textiles were religiously symbolic. Around 2010, initiatives were put in place to revitalize the handloom industry by providing women with new yarns, looms, and loom sheds. Within this modernized Ri-Bhoi weaving context, there was a shared understanding that weaving is an important part of women's lives as well as their *cultural identities*. Participants spoke with pride about their ability to weave traditional garments that represented who they were in the context of their social group – that is, that represented their culture. The below identified themes represent value that Ri-Bhoi women weavers attached to various aspects of their weaving tradition, which in turn, supported their cultural identities.

Maintaining Tradition of Weaving through Acquisition and Exchange of Knowledge: Women weavers of Ri-Bhoi have preserved their tradition of weaving by exchanging weaving knowledge from one generation to the next. When such exchange of weaving knowledge was unavailable, that is, when mothers did not know how to weave, women interested in learning how to weave taught themselves (through trial and error), as explained by P16 “I learned by myself only. I taught myself. No one taught me.” or sought assistance from other weavers in the community who were willing to share their knowledge, “I learned to weave by watching others weaving...” (P12). As such, acquiring weaving knowledge directly from family members or community members became culturally significant and valued among women weavers, helping women to maintain the tradition of weaving, and thus to establish a sense of cultural identity.

Securing Social Support from Family and Community: Over time, family, friends, community members, and Self Help Groups provided varying forms of social support to weavers that facilitated weavers' continued participation in and functional and emotional investment in the craft of weaving, reinforcing the importance of weaving in Ri-Bhoi women's lives, and presumably, shaping their cultural identities. Weavers spoke about receiving (a) informational social support, that is, sharing weaving knowledge, (b) emotional support, that is, friends, family, and other community members recognizing and appreciating the weaving work, and (c) instrumental support, that is, receiving raw materials required for weaving.

Maintaining Tradition of Weaving through Creation of Textiles that Symbolize Tribe and Culture: By ensuring the continuity and preservation of weaving practices in Ri-Bhoi, women weavers are providing a physical product that symbolizes Ri-Bhoi peoples' culture and identity. Participants discussed how motifs and colors incorporated into their traditional woven clothes were representative of their culture and themselves, as P2 explained, “by this cloth, that is the identity for us. We are from particular tribe, from particular kingdom... That depict[s] us, that we are from that particular area”, thus serving as badges of identity.

Achieving a Sense of Fulfillment (Joy, Happiness, and Pride): Weaving established a sense of responsibility within participants, as they contributed to society by creating textiles and garments that depicted their culture, thus regarding themselves as keepers of tradition. The capacity to symbolize their culture brought immense joy and pride to the participants, as seen in P1's narration, “I feel satisfied because weaving depict[s] my culture, our own culture. So, I feel proud that I know how to weave.”

Conclusion: This research identified four themes illuminating how women weavers in Ri-Bhoi developed a close connection to weaving, which helped shape and mold their cultural identities. Engaging in weaving not only helped women build special skills that directly supported their cultural tradition, it also helped them to establish a sense of purpose by providing them a means through which they could contribute to their society by preserving and continuing weaving traditions. In a very salient way, then, weaving as an activity provided women weavers in Ri-Bhoi with a significant role within the community, thus contributing to their sense of self and their cultural identities by affording them a palpable means by which to participate in and contribute to their society, to preserve their culture, and to nurture their spirits and souls.

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