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NOTES AND REVIEWS

Book Review: Voices of Weavers

Fink, Jella. 2020. *Voices of Weavers: Textile Cultures, Craftsmanship, and Identity in Contemporary Myanmar*. Münster; New York: Waxmann.

A girl who does not know how to weave is like being broken
(proverb from Myanmar)

International readers can welcome this captivating research into two idiosyncratic Myanmar textile weaving traditions. The author of the book, German anthropologist Jella Fink, specialises in Myanmar material culture, the minorities there and rural economics. The book is based on her extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2014 and 2017 for her PhD thesis. The present article provides a succinct review of the topics addressed in her book.

Myanmar stands out due to its rich and highly diverse geographic and ethnic regions. In order to carry out fieldwork, the author has chosen two distinct regions. One of them is located in the centre of Myanmar, in the vicinity of Mandalaya, the second-largest city in the country, and representative of former royal capitals. They have a long professional textile weaving tradition in this area. The other region is Kengtung, located in the mountainous western region bordered by China, Laos and Thailand, which is a home to highly distinct ethnic groups. Textile weaving here plays a substantial role as a domestic handicraft. In both cases, textile weaving is primarily performed by women, which helps better understand the social, economic and cultural roles of women across the different regions of modern Myanmar. The tradition of textile weaving is also closely related to the sense of ethnic belonging.

The lives of weavers and their textile creations taken from the local perspective forms the central topic of this monograph. The author researches the material culture related to textiles from the perspective of weavers, focusing on their everyday lives, textile production and on the role handicraft plays in their group identity. The study, which initially solely revolved around material culture, has over the time evolved into a story that combines national narratives, suppression, freedom and gender issues. It is important for Fink to understand to what extent textiles represent cultural memory during a period of economic and political change in Myanmar.

The book consists of five chapters. The first provides the general background for the research discourse on material culture. The author analyses the changes that were initiated by the so-called material turn of the 1980s. She points out how the production and consumption cultures of items are approached separately and how research mainly focuses on consumption. This, however, is not adequate to observe societies – including Myanmar's textile culture – where consumption cannot be clearly separated from production. Thus, both producers and production are often understudied.

According to Fink, modern European artisans can be positioned somewhere between mass production and the fine art. Depending on the era, their role has evolved from the one exclusively providing for their local community to the one satisfying the individual needs of consumers. Crafts have found a variety of niches to survive in the changed conditions, starting from representing the local identity and free-time activities to worldwide commerce. The author claims that unlike Europe no distinction between handicraft and art is made in Myanmar. The authorship and creativity are likewise unimportant: both the artists and craftspeople would rather follow specific rules and generally remain anonymous.

Myanmar is a diverse country of complicated history. Earlier records of its textile history, mainly written down over during the past couple of centuries, can be found in travel reports, missionary writings, and reports by colonial officials from the end of the 19th century.

Textile weaving is a very important type of handicraft because it has been actively, on a daily basis, practiced in Myanmar, thus forming an integral part of the material culture that bears such importance to many people. The author considers weavers an understudied group and in order to amend this state of affairs follows the human-centred approach in her fieldwork. In addition to this she analyses the material, symbolic and semiotic meaning of the woven textiles. Fink also provides an overview of the methodology of the fieldwork carried out for the book, among which the apprenticeship method, and the method where photos and samples of material were used to initiate conversations, deserve special attention.

Chapter two offers an overview of the earlier history of Myanmar, which became independent in 1947. Their history has mainly been written down by the large ethnic groups living on the plains, Western missionaries, and British colonial officials. Representatives of minorities, however, have been overlooked. Before colonisation, Myanmar had a long tradition of kingdoms with characteristic changes of dynasty and governing centre. Towards the end of the chapter, the author analyses the problems related to more than 135 local ethnicities and their sense of belonging, and points out that although publicly all of the ethnic groups have been declared equal, this does not ring true in everyday life.

In chapter three, Fink focuses on the weavers who create the so-called one hundred shuttles weaves – *Lun`t-aya Acheik* in the Manipur language – in Amarapura, a place that has been considered the centre of professional textile weaving in Myanmar, Sagaing and Mandalay regions. It is essentially a weaving technique that uses weft yarns of different colours in which pattern-forming stripes covering warps are woven into a plain weave textile (Photo 1). The interwoven weft yarns create transitions on the back of the woven textile making it single-sided (Photo 2). The textile is woven with its back facing upwards with the correctness of the pattern checked using a mirror. It is exclusively set up on horizontal treadle looms. Initially the textiles were woven to be worn by members of the royal court only; later on the fabrics became part of the attire of the rich elite. While earlier, in the case of weaving textiles of similar technique, only three shuttles were used, then in terms of royal fabrics the number of shuttles is 120, occasionally even up to 200. The process is extremely slow: two weavers working together need four to five weeks on average to complete one woven textile as they manage to weave 5–15 cm per day. In the case of a higher number of shuttles, the process is even slower. The silk fabrics woven in the region were fully idiosyncratic (Photo 3). This fabric has traditionally been woven by both male and female members of the royal court, although today weaving is an activity carried out exclusively by women. The weavers are classified as working class due to their small income. At the beginning

of the 20th century, they started weaving similar fabrics of simplified weave on power looms, something that is still a male job. The high level of woven textiles also led to the fabrics being transported to Europe as well as to other areas in Asia.

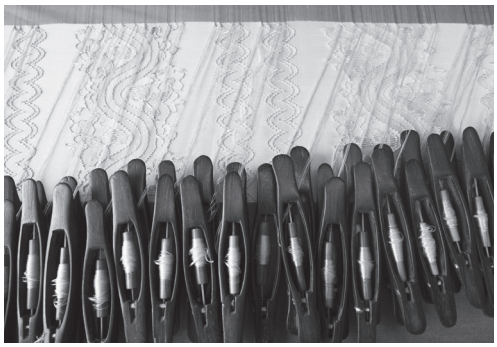


Photo 1. Lun`t-aya Acheik *on looms with the shuttles used to weave the pattern (Fink 2020: 79).*

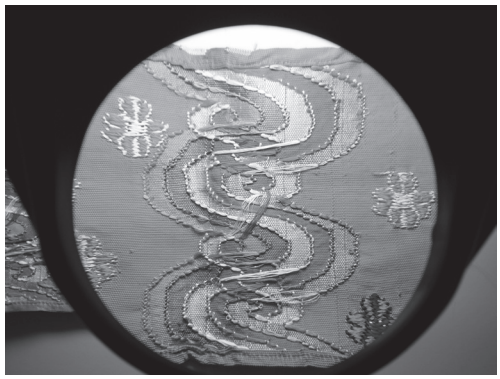


Photo 2. Lun`t-aya Acheik *reverse detail (Fink 2020: 81).*



Photo 3. Selection of Lun`t-aya Acheik *pattern samples (Fink 2020: 80).*

Fink highlights important activities from the perspective of preserving skills. First she mentions weaving schools. These were established by British colonists at the beginning of the 20th century with the initial aim of developing domestic handicraft for purely economic reasons. By now, however, the schools have acquired symbolic meaning and have become the bearers of cultural memory. Some schools have both a museum and a shop added to the compound. In addition to newer techniques, the traditional weaving techniques also have an important part in the curriculum.

In addition to schools, textile weaving workshops or mills with a long history are of great importance. Some are still operating today. The woven textiles are primarily targeted at Myanmar customers who are seeking textiles for their wedding attire and for other festive occasions. The families of the master artisans operating in the mills form a community living and functioning together. Workers are extremely loyal to their chosen profession and employer.

Several types of domestic craft are widespread in the areas with a low level of industrialisation; textile weaving is one of the few occupations that offers women professional engagement. After having trained with a master, young women can either establish their own textile weaving workshops or start work at an existing mill. When planning a family, one option would be to weave at home for a mill. In such cases, the female family members will be working together with the patterns, and materials are provided by their employer. Once a month an agent visits them, exchanging completed fabrics for new materials. Professional weavers often choose to remain single, thus forming a larger joint family with the other women working in the mill.

The *Lun`t-aya Acheik* technique can change in time depending on the wishes and interests of the ordering party. While weaving more festive textiles, gold and silver threads as well as embroidered pearls are

used. Upon textile revitalisation, changes in patterns and materials are also applied. In the case of cheaper fabrics, the finish is achieved with glitter glue and stick-on pearls. The textile of a simpler pattern can also be woven alone, thus remarkably accelerating the working process. A typical 'modern style' fabric is based on stripes, woven using two thread colours in the warp. Silk, which was historically used as the main material, has become significantly more expensive recently, giving rise to changes in the use of material. Since 2011, raw silk has been blended with polyester during the spinning process. These changes have been brought about by the weavers meeting the wishes of their customers, changes in customer groups and availability of materials.

While historically weavers used a certain number of pattern types, today there are no limits to pattern creation and new ones are constantly being added. This, however, requires very good technical skill and creative expression and for some weaving mills this has become an important way to distinguish themselves. Old "royal" patterns comprise a richness of figures densely set along a fabric and require 200–400 shuttles.

In her summary to the chapter, the author admits that *Lun´t-aya Acheik* weaving has been kept under a kind of veil of mystery until today: techniques and skills are passed on from the master to her apprentice. This ensures the connection to a certain geographic area. Due to its craftspeople, *Lun´t-aya Acheik* will securely remain connected to royal history and ethnic Bamar group who still consider weaving to play an important cultural role that is significantly influenced by the surrounding socio-cultural and economic network. Each textile is unique, yet still woven according to the evolved canon of techniques and composition.

Chapter four offers an insight into the everyday life, work arrangements, economic relationships and material culture of the ethnic groups in East Myanmar, in the Kengtung region near the borders with China and Thailand. This high plateau is separated from central Myanmar by almost impassable high mountain ranges, which is why this region has remained secluded from the rest of the country. Many ethnic groups reside here, having a multitude of cross-border contacts due to their location and ancestral roots. The most important centre of the region is the city of Kengtung, a meeting place for people from across the whole region. Despite the fact that the ethnic groups have become closely intertwined, each keeps its own textile weaving culture and traditions pure and unaltered.

Due to the rich variety of ethnic groups, there are also very diverse traditions, customs and techniques of weaving textiles. Fink provides a glimpse into the handicraft traditions of the Anni, Palaung, Akha, Akhö, Tai loi, Lahu na and Lahu shi ethnic groups. Without dwelling on details, several similarities and differences can be noted staring from looms, which can vary greatly from group to group. The Palaung, for example, have archaic looms and practice back-strap loom weaving with short-spanned warp lengths. The shape of the looms used by the Lois is similar but they use long-spanned warp threads. Anni and Akha women use simple wooden and bamboo looms made at home, yet their position when weaving is distinctive: the Anni sit at their looms in a position which is similar to that of our typical Estonian weavers (Photo 4). The Akha sit



Photo 4. Anni woman weaving a striped fabric (Fink 2020: 110).

sideways of the warp on the long-spanned looms, which is why the width of the textiles they can weave is limited.

An aspect common to all the above-mentioned regions is the fact that middle-aged or older women deal with weaving, passing their skills on to the younger members of the family either by word of mouth or by working together. Some Akha families, however, do not see any point in teaching their daughters weaving because they consider it a difficult and complicated job. They send their children to boarding schools instead. Elderly women of the same ethnic group, on the other hand, see weaving as an opportunity to escape the hard work in the countryside and to earn some extra money.

Weaving is mainly done for personal use, although the textiles are increasingly also seen as a possible trading commodity. Among the Palaung, some masters who are happy to receive tourists develop and prepare their craft for sale. The Akha, too, take active steps towards marketing their handicraft outside their villages, yet it is men rather than women who are involved in trading.

The materials used by other ethnic groups are just as diverse. Traditionally, cotton has been used as the weaving material; in more recent times, however, the mixture of cotton and polyester has become just as common. The most typical are white or black fabrics and multicoloured striped textiles in plain weave (Photo 5).

The appearance of hand-woven textiles, however, is influenced by the availability of raw materials and their price, and also by the ever increasing opportunities to sell fabrics to tourists. This, in turn, has had an impact on the reevaluation of the textile finishing techniques that have been in use thus far, for example it is difficult to sell tourists the typical woven textiles for sloppy selvages, which is why weavers are adapting their way of weaving depending on the wishes of potential buyers. Fink cites the works by the Palaung, who produce attire representing their ethnic culture and

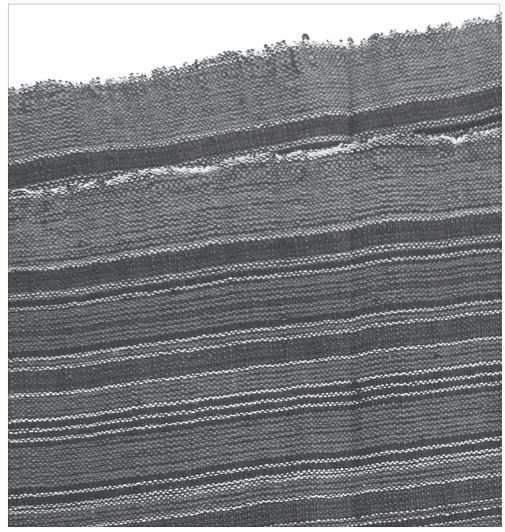


Photo 5. A detail from a striped fabric woven by the Anni (Fink 2020: 113).

traditions of an extremely high quality and only for members of their own community. In order to sell their work to those outside their culture, they have developed a shawl using a special technique that is not related to their traditional technique in any way. It is still possible to notice other occurrences of technique and attire simplification. Adapting to changes is definitely a characteristic of a living tradition. Another manifestation of this can be seen by integrating details borrowed from every-day life into traditional compositions. A memorable example of this would be an artisan who, having survived the repeated armed attacks of rebels on her mountain village in her childhood, cross-stitched colourful machine guns as part of the traditional composition (Photo 6).

Although the changes in the traditions of hand-woven textiles are more extensive in the villages in the vicinity of Kengtung, as they are primarily motivated by tourists and the possibility to sell their woven textiles, in the villages farther away, where the textiles are woven for personal use only, traditions are less prone to change. Even in the villages with a variety of ethnic groups, their traditions do not mix. Independent of the loca-

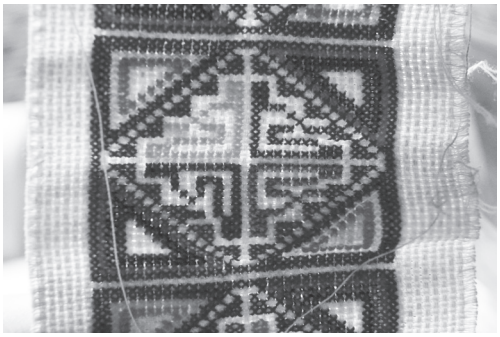


Photo 6. Akha cross-stitch embroidery featuring a pattern of four machine guns (Fink 2020: 127).

tion of the ethnic groups, their handicraft techniques are, for the most part, similar, proudly demonstrating their belonging to this or that group. Complicated political situations have further enhanced the preservation of each group's cultural memory through their craft.

Textile weaving offers women the possibility to earn a small extra income independently, thus also helping to empower them both economically and socially. Unlike the professional *Lun´t-aya Acheik* weavers, in the Kengtung area it is supplementary work carried out in addition to duties at home and with the family: a single professional weaver living without a family would be an unthinkable phenomenon in this region. Similarly, no question of authorship of the woven textiles occurs here because all of them are completed as a result of joint efforts by the female family members. Embroideries, however, are ascribed to certain masters and, as a rule, one author works with them.

In chapter five Fink provides a summary and highlights the extent of differences found in the textile producing tradition in contemporary Myanmar. She emphasizes the potential of hand-woven textiles as a source of information that may take on the role of an alternative approach to document and research history.

Fink has found, by highlighting the Myanmar way of textile weaving, worthwhile material that provides a colourful overview of the different facets of handicraft in its abundance. The author has been highly successful at mapping changes in a living tradition and at analysing the underlying reasons. If, in pre-industrialised Europe, professional handicraft production – reminiscent of *Lun´t-aya Acheik* weaving – existed hand in hand with the domestic production of household utensils, which can be associated with Kengtung weavers, then today the role of handicraft has drastically changed and there are only few examples similar to that of living Myanmar textile weaving tradition. However, the changes taking place in the weaving tradition of Myanmar enable one to better understand the economic and cultural reasons for the changes that have occurred in European handicraft traditions.

All things considered, the fresh approach of the research must be acknowledged: with the help of weavers, Fink opens a new perspective on weaving bringing out the views of the artisans in particular. Focusing on the weavers, and providing depiction of the broad economic as well as cultural background are the strongest aspects of the publication. This is an aspect that is, without doubt, worth further study in future scientific research on handicraft.

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