



TEXTILES OF THE BANJARA: CLOTH AND CULTURE OF A WANDERING TRIBE

by *Charllotte Kwon and Tim McLaughlin.*

Thames & Hudson, 500 5th Ave., New York, New York 10110.

2016. Hardcover. 191 pages. \$50.00.

This beautiful and informative book examines the origins, history, and culture of a nomadic people who have roamed India for hundreds of years, possibly since the time of Alexander the Great. Their bright textiles display detailed geometric embroidery, cowrie shells, and mirrors, yet this is the first significant study of their work to be published for the general reader. An extensive bibliography is provided for those who are interested in the historical record, and while the text does contain some notes it is not so scholarly as to be difficult to read. The text is well illustrated with line drawings, maps, reproductions of images from nineteenth-century books, and black and white photographs taken by the British during the period of the empire. It is the talented color photography by Charllotte Kwon, however, that makes this more than an interesting history book. While the Banjara men dress quite plainly, the Banjara women and girls wear their highly decorated and colorful garments every day, and not just for holy days or special occasions. There are numerous full-page photographs of the people in their beautiful tribal costumes standing or sitting outdoors; there are even more beautifully focused close-up photographs of items of clothing and accessories. This is one of those rare books that satisfactorily please the eye and feed the mind.

The first two chapters introduce the reader to the Banjara people as they appear in India today and examines their history as leaders of caravans. They are thought to be from northwest India originally and may be kin to the European gypsies. Chapter three examines their folk-style embroidery in “The Song of the Cloth,” and the fourth chapter examines the construction of their clothing, their heavy metal jewelry, and their use of tattoos.

Since the 1960’s the nomadic, self-contained lives of the Banjara have changed. The influx of cheap manufactured clothes and settlement in more urban areas has seen a decrease in hand-made and home-made clothing. “REVIVAL: New Masters of the Art,” the last chapter, explores recent attempts to revive the arts of embroidery and embellishment to appeal to contemporary markets and thus provide employment and income to a remarkable people.

Readers interested in anthropology, ethnic clothing, embroidery, and Indian history/culture will enjoy this book, and it can serve as a beautiful coffee table book as well.

*Reviewed by Gaye Elder
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