



Textiles of the Banjara - Cloth and Culture of a Wandering Tribe by Charlotte Kwon and Tim McLaughlin. Published Thames & Hudson: 2016. Hard cover; 192pp; over 300 illustrations (160 in colour). Size 9.3 x 12.3". ISBN 9780500518373

Review by Dana McCown

This magnificent book about The Banjaras of India is a first to combine the fascinating history of these wandering people with their colourful embroidery and textile traditions.

Charlotte Kwon and Tim McLaughlin have done extensive research taking them from Rajasthan down through the southern states of India. The richness of McLaughlin's photographic documentation is unequalled and it is worth having this book just for visual pleasure.

Originally the Banjaras were occupied in the business of cartage as independent merchants. At other times they were carried goods and supplies for kings and armies. I was surprised to read that they had caravans containing up to 20,000 oxen laden with salt and grain. Thus they dispersed to various parts of India. Research indicates that the European gypsies may have actually originated in northern India from the Banjara who are also called Lambani, Roma and Gypsies.

Besides the rich history and culture of the tribe, there is a large section of the book devoted to the folk embroidery traditions of stitch, pattern, mirror work, coin and bead. The clothing and ornament, as related historically by Edward Moor, 1794, was said to weigh up to 10 pounds. Interesting legends are included that give a colourful picture of how the style was developed. All this is illustrated with full-page quality photographs

I first encountered the Banjaras in the 1980s along the road doing manual labour and construction work with the women wearing all their traditional finery. Such colourful textiles and jewellery made them stand out in any crowd.

Through the years I have been saddened to find that the younger women are now starting to wear saris and abandon their traditional jewellery, seemingly trying to fit in with the general public. Kwon and McLaughlin state, "It only takes one generation of neglect to lose the skills that a group has carried for centuries."

They discuss NGOs that are trying to revive the lost embroidery skills, helping to create markets to give an income to depressed communities. Through Maiwa Foundation of Canada, Kwon and McLaughlin are also providing an outlet for those products to the Western market.

Publisher: www.thameshudson.com.au

Maiwa Foundation: www.maiwa.com/foundation